著●ウスバー

この世界がゲームだと俺だけが知っている 1

イラスト●イチゼン

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この世界がゲームだと俺だけが知っている

I am the only one who knows this world is a game.

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Sekai Game Volume 1.

Prologue.

Part 1.

July 1st, 20XX.

“It-it’s all your fault. It’s because you were trying to cheat on me…!”

A voice called down to me.

I laid on the ground, a knife thrust deep into my chest.

(I can’t believe… over something like that…)

Thus, I, “Souma Sagara”, died.

However, this was all in a game!

The game that I, Souma Sagara, was playing is called “New Communicate Online”, or more popularly known as “Nekomimineko”. It is in many ways a famous VR game, and in a certain sense, you can say that it once took the world by storm.

A VR game is quite literally one that takes place within a virtual reality. It’s a game where you play by moving your body as if you had entered the game world, but in the end no matter how realistic it seems, a game is still a game.

Unlike reality, dying does not mean that it's the end. By reloading the game and returning to a save point, you can continue playing as if nothing had happened.

As if proving that point, the words "Game Over" floated into view in the darkness, and below it a menu with the options "Load" and "Return to Title" appeared. I unhesitantly chose "Load" and selected the latest save data, and involuntarily muttered to myself.

"Still… as expected of Nekomimineko. To think that I would get killed over something like that, it's sure living up to its name of the shittiest game of the century."

What I had been working on until just a moment ago was a quest that involved getting friendly with a certain female NPC and exploring a dungeon together. After much hard work, I somehow managed to gain the affection of the character (named Layla), but as I dropped by the item shop to buy some torches before heading to the dungeon, her attitude suddenly changed and she stabbed me to death.

Now that I think about it, she probably didn't like the fact that the shopkeeper was female.

…Just how high is her jealousy setting, jeez.

As I was once again being impressed by the unreasonableness of this game, the game data finished loading and I returned to the last save point, only to hear a light beep informing of an incoming call.

“Ah. It’s from Maki.”

I was still in the game, but that was fine. Calling out the menu screen, I pressed the accept call button. Immediately the call connected, and the sluggish voice of my cousin Maki echoed from thin air.

“Souma? Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. What’s up?”

One of the features of these VR games is that even while in-game you can communicate with the real world through calls and texts. Being inside a VR space meant that you could call hands free without any particular need of a physical device, so communication might actually be more convenient than in the real world.

“Don’t *what’s up* me. Didn’t you promise to help organize our storeroom today!”

“Eh? Huh, now that you mention it…”

I had a faint feeling that I might have made such a promise… Or maybe not… In the first place, ever since starting to live alone I spent pretty much all of everyday gaming, so the sense of each passing day had started to fade.

“Even after I told you not to forget that many times!”

“Uh, uhm… sorry.”

“…Fine then. I thought it was probably something like that, so I had already started by myself.”

“A-Ahh. I see, sorry.”

Maki is my cousin and two years younger than me, but even then she holds quite a cheeky attitude towards me.

Her short and slender body conceals an abnormal amount of strength, and while she wears a harmless expression she is actually quite the troublemaker. Frankly, if I were to count the number of times that I’ve fallen prey to Maki’s antics, the fingers on my hands and my feet wouldn’t be enough.

I took advantage of starting university to go live on my own, and things became a bit quieter, but even then we were close enough that we would occasionally correspond through calls or texts.

“So yeah. I started cleaning, but I found something strange…”

“Something strange?”

“Mm. Uhh, it’s orange colored, and ball shaped?”

“An orange ball?”

It’s not just an orange right? Ah, but if an orange was in that storeroom then it would have rotted a long time ago…

“There’s quite a few of them. Uhm, one, two, three, four… there seems to be around seven?”

“Seven? …Seven orange balls?! H-Hey, they don’t happen to have stars inside them right?”

No, such an absurd thing can’t be possible…

“Mm? Let me test that.”

“Huh? Test? What do you…”

The sound of a crash immediately answered my question.

“Uhh… there doesn’t seem to be anything inside?”

“W-What did you just do…!”

“Eh? You wanted to know if there was something inside it, so I cracked it open to check…”

Maki answered nonchalantly. This is why you can never be too careful around her. The things she can do with a calm face have always been quite extreme.

“Maki, you know, that could’ve actually been…”

“Actually been what?”

“…Nevermind.”

Now that it was cracked open, there was no point in saying anything. I swallowed the words that I was about to say.

“Is there anything else interesting?”

“Nn? Let’s see.”

Maki replied to my words with sounds of her fumbling through objects.

“Ah. What… is this, a mummy’s hand? But it’s so small. It might not be a human hand. Maybe from something like a monkey?”

“C-Could that maybe be that famous monkey’s paw that grants the owner three wishes…?”

The words I spoke were drowned out by the ruffling of a plastic bag.

“Eh? What? I was just about to put the mummy hand into the burnable trash.”

“You… ah whatever.”

If I remember correctly, the monkey’s paw was supposed to be some kind of cursed object that fulfilled the owner’s wishes with unintended consequences.

Although it’s probably not the real thing anyways, it’s better not to get involved.

“Anything else?”

“Mm.”

After a short while,

“I-I found something that’s really hard to describe!”

Maki’s surprised voice rang out.

“What kind of thing is that?”

“U-Uhh, how do I describe this. It’s golden, and it’s shaped like a watering can, but it’s also like a kettle. But it’s too small to be a watering can or a kettle…”

Gathering together Maki’s ramblings, I tried to imagine the object in my mind. Starting with a small golden kettle and morphing it as described, the shape of a certain object that frequently appeared in folklore took form.

I involuntarily raised my voice.

“Could that maybe be that thing with a djinn in it that grants three wishes, that magical la…”

“I know! It’s a curry pot!”

Even then, my voice was covered up Maki’s even louder voice.

“Eh? A curry pot…”

She probably means those specialized things that pour curry. It’s true that the shape seems similar. But still.

“At our place we use ladles for curry, so guess I’ll throw this away.”

“Ah, wait a–”

I was too late. Crash, the sound of something breaking could be heard.

“Nn? Did you say something?”

“…No, nothing.”

It was too late anyways. I could only give up and wish the lamp luck in its next life.

“Okay then. Let’s continue!”

“Don’t immediately break the next one!”

Just in case, I put out a warning.

Of course I didn’t believe that they were real, but it’s definitely curious that these wish-granting items would appear one after

another. With Maki destroying them all as soon as she found them, if possible I would like to investigate the next one a bit more without it being destroyed. Even if they were just randomly created replicas, it could still become the topic of a conversation.

What would appear next? I slightly looked forward to finding out.

“Ah, found something!”

It seemed that she found something new because Maki’s voice hit my ears.

“I found another one! This is… what is it? It seems like a long, thin strip of paper.”

“A strip of paper?”

A strip of paper and wishes… Ah, it must be that!

“Hey, isn’t that a Tanzaku? You know, the one where you write wishes for Tanabata?”

“Tanzaku? Ah, mm, yeah, it seems like it might be!”

Still, suddenly it turned a lot more reasonable or less exotic or something. Well, not that it really matters.

“Since I found it, maybe I’ll write down a wish.”

“Ah, wait! Don’t be so hasty…”

I hurriedly tried to stop her, but,

“Done!”

“So fast!”

I was too late. Normally there wouldn’t be any dangers associated with writing a Tanzaku, but after seeing all these strange relics, you can’t be too sure. I was slightly wary of it, but it seemed that Maki wasn’t worried in the slightest.

“…Nothing’s happening.”

That’s why, when I heard her response, I was honestly slightly relieved.

“Of course. How could something like that actually grant your wishes… So, what did you wish for?”

“I wished to become a princess.”

“…I hope you’ll always be filled with dreams.”

“Yeah!”

She completely missed the sarcasm. Well, that’s part of what makes her Maki.

“For a moment it seemed like it was going to work. I guess the problem is that it’s not Tanabata.”

While spewing such nonsense, Maki’s search continued.

“Ah, I think I found something amazing. What is this again… uh… a Pico Pico Hammer?”

“Pico Pico Hammer?”

I didn't know of any legends about a Pico Pico Hammer granting wishes. As I was tilting my head in confusion, Maki swung the conversation in a completely unrelated direction.

"You know. Speaking of Tanzaku, isn't it almost Tanabata?"

"Hm? Ah, yeah…"

Well, since other than going to class I spend the rest of my time holed up in my house playing video games, that had nothing to do with me.

Or so I thought, but Maki followed with a strange request.

"Hey Souma. Come play at our place on Tanabata. You know, to make up for skipping today's storeroom cleaning."

"Huh!? No way no way no way! I have class on Tanabata! And after class I have games to play so I have no time to visit!"

I refused the unexpected request with a rather harsh tone. However, I immediately regretted it the moment it came out of my mouth. The aura on the other side of the phone changed.

"…You're always like that, Souma. Even when I invite you, it's always games, games, games, games, games. Even today's cleaning, I worked so hard to finally get a yes from you, but in the end you forgot about it because of your games…"

"Ah, uhm… Maki?"

Maki's voice was low. That was a sign that she was angry.

The moment when I plugged my ears in the VR world was almost exactly the same moment as when a voice loud enough to echo through the whole world rang out.

“If you like your games so much, why don’t you just go live in one, you jerk!”

At the same time, an exaggerated sound of something breaking could be heard from far away.

Stunned by Maki’s sudden assault, what reached my ears was the voice of an equally stunned Maki.

“Huh? The Pico Pico Hammer broke. Even though it looked like it was made of pretty sturdy wood.”

“A hammer, made of wood?”

Hearing those words, something clicked within me. Speaking of a wooden hammer that can grant wishes, only one thing came to mind.

In other words, that was not a Pico Pico Hammer…”

“Hey, could that maybe be the Lucky…”

However, I was unable to finish the rest of my sentence.

My vision wavered.

The virtual world collapsed inwards, losing its appearance.

(What’s g…)

My words made no sound.

Everything started swirling around and being sucked into a big something.

Right before I lost consciousness…

“If you like your games so much, why don’t you just go live in one, you jerk!”

For some reason Maki’s shout once again echoed clearly in my head.

Part 2.

I opened my eyes to the wind brushing my cheeks.

While feeling something slightly off about that fact, I glanced at the surroundings.

“This is…”

I was standing on a wide road. On the left was a forest, and on the right a grassy plain could be seen. It was a scenery that I vaguely recalled. At least, I clearly remembered the signpost visible nearby as well as the vegetation in the forest.

Most likely, I was near the low level area called The Forest of Beginnings on the outskirts of the first town, Ramlich.

(I was in the middle of the Capital a moment ago though…)

Exactly what had happened in that instant? Even if this game “Nekomimineko” – “New Communication Online” – is called a department store of bugs, I hadn’t yet heard of a bug being

discovered that sent you randomly flying somewhere just by standing in town.

(Could it be an undiscovered bug?)

For a moment that was what I thought, but the irregularity wasn't simply limited to a change in location.

"Maki?"

I tried calling out, but there was no response. The call seemed to have been cut.

I faltered slightly, then decided for the moment to call Maki back.

"The menu won't appear…?"

I realized that I could no longer use network based functionalities like calls or text. I couldn't open the menu.

(Is this a bug? But it's a bit…)

It was weird that I couldn't even use the phone. That was not a feature provided by the game, but rather a common functionality supplied by the VR environment. It was not something that a bug from a game could affect.

(Then, a problem with the VR machine itself…?)

Perplexed, I reflexively tried to open the game menu.

But, that was also met with no response.

"What's going on?"

Inadvertently muttering to myself, I caught sight of a further abnormality.

Scanning over my own getup, what I was wearing was not the equipment that I poured my heart and soul into collecting. I had on some flimsy leather armor and leather boots, and hanging from my waist was a worn leather scabbard that contained a sword as well as a small pouch.

There was no need to dig through my memories. However you look at it, these were the lowest rank equipment. I haven't seen such frail equipment outside of the starting equipment from when you begin the game.

(Thinking about it, this place too…)

I looked over the surrounding scenery once again. I had thought this looked familiar. Of course! This was the starting location of Nekomimineko.

Though I couldn't confirm my stats without opening the menu, I could tell that my body felt different from before. It was possible that I had been reverted back to level 1.

(My save file couldn't have been wiped… could it?)

I immediately shook my head at my own question. It was true that with Nekomimineko it wouldn't be strange even if such a bug would occur, and that would explain warping back to the start location with starting gear. But in the end that still would not explain why the menu screen could not be opened.

In addition, those were not the only anomalies.

I couldn’t quite explain it, but something felt off about the surrounding scenery. Like… everything I was seeing was subtly different from usual or something…

“!? Who’s there!?”

However, my thoughts were forcibly cut off. Further down the road, what sounded like someone yelling could be heard.

“Could it be…”

Thinking for a moment, I immediately remembered.

If this was right after the start of a new game, then that might be happening.

“!”

If that was the case, then I couldn’t just leave it alone. I dashed towards the direction of the voice.

My body was light. The virtual body in the game world could move much more nimbly compared to my body in real life. The difference could be felt even in the initial state at the beginning of the game.

“Step!”

Saying this, I “ordered” the skill name set in the system. My surroundings blurred, and I was assaulted with an intense acceleration that couldn’t be experienced in reality.

Floating for a few moments, I landed, and was faced with the after-cast stun – the short stun after a skill finishes. After the after-cast stun ended, I started moving again.

It seemed like I was able to use the Step skill. I was wondering what I would do if, like the menu screen, I couldn't use skills anymore, but it seemed that worry was unwarranted.

Step is one of the basic skills that everyone is able to use from the very start, but its broad range of uses means it's not just a basic skill that can be easily replaced. Though my inexplicable unease did not decrease but rather increased, knowing that I was able to use this skill offered me relief that could not be understated.

In that case, the next thing to test would be…

"Highstep!"

I tried to use the advanced movement skill that could be learned after mastering Step, but,

"…Nothing's happening."

The test was a failure. At least, it seemed like all of my character data had been reset to its initial values.

Actually, rather than the data being reset, it might simply be the start of a new game from the very beginning.

"There it is!"

Moving onwards while confirming my body's condition, before long I was able to see the location of the battle. The first thing I saw was a large wagon. An old-fashioned horse-drawn wagon

that you would be hard pressed to find in the real world was stopped in the middle of the road.

Around the wagon were people fighting.

They numbered five. The first to catch my eye was a female wielding a sword, her back facing towards me.

Following that, the outlines of four lizardmen wielding weapons could be seen, their backs facing the wagon, positioned as if trying to surround the female.

Seeing this, I was convinced.

This was, without a doubt, the first event of the game.

The unreasonable starting event that was said to be the cause of over 90 percent of first time player deaths, the infamous "Lizardmen's Trap" awaits!

Part 3.

—Bandits! Someone, help!

As you reached the Kingdom of Licht, the destination of your travels, a yell reached your ears.
After a brief moment of consideration, you dashed towards the direction of the voice with your trusty sword in hand.
The sound of swords clashing and people fighting echoed.
Squinting, you spotted an intense battle taking place.
The bandits were assaulting a stopped wagon, and the merchants were trying to defend it.
One of the merchants yelled out to you.

—Thank the gods, an adventurer! We will reward you, so please help!

Giving the merchants a silent nod, you engaged the bandits. Thus, your adventure had started…

This was the intro story written on the official homepage of Nekomimineko.

Matching the words that resurfaced from the back of my mind with the scene in front of my eyes, I focused on the battle unfolding ahead. It was just as I remembered.

The event nicknamed The First-Timer Killer, the “Lizardmen’s Trap”. The official name was “Protect the Merchants” if I remembered correctly. As the nickname “First-Timer Killer” would indicate, it was said that most of the players encountering this event for the first time would end up experiencing their first death.

I was no exception. During my first time I had been swiftly killed, not even having understood what had happened. It was probably only after my second death that I was able to figure out what was going on.

What made this event so tough was not just that the enemies were rather strong, but more than that it was difficult to take in the situation at first glance. What’s more, the more familiar a player was with games, the easier it was for them to fall into this trap.

For now, let’s try taking stock of the situation.

The one closest to me was a sword-wielding female with her back facing me.

Further away, with their backs to the wagon, the four lizardmen stood with their weapons at the ready, as if surrounding the female.

…Now, do you understand?

At first glance, this situation seemed as if the lizardmen were attacking the human female. But, the lizardmen were *fighting with their backs to the wagon*.

Taking another calm look, in comparison to the proper equipment the female was wearing, with leather armor, a scimitar, and a shield, the lizardmen were wearing what looked to be regular clothes, and they were merely holding items for self-defense like knives and wooden sticks.

—In other words, this was a scene of kind lizardmen merchants and their wagon being assaulted by a frightening armored female bandit.

If you were to carefully read the story written on the homepage, it does in fact mention that there were multiple merchants, but the important part about the merchants being lizardmen was not included.

The majority of players, struck with the misconceptions of either “lizardmen are enemies” or “the side at a numbers disadvantage could not be the aggressor”, rushed in towards the lizardmen.

By doing so, the lizardmen who had been friendly NPCs ended up turning into enemies, and as you were fighting the lizardmen, the female bandit who you thought was an ally ended up stabbing you in the back.

This was indeed the fearful “Lizardmen’s Trap”.

Actually, the lizardmen themselves were not to blame in any way. They merely played the pitiful role of being attacked just because they looked scary, even though they had done nothing bad.

There were players who got stuck in this “Lizardmen’s Trap” and died over ten times without knowing what happened, and it seemed that there was even a grade schooler who was traumatized by this event and could not play VR games for a while.

Whether it was made on purpose or if it was something that just came to be, this absurd starting event was one of the reasons why Nekomimineko was commonly regarded as a niche game.

Of course, now that I knew how it worked there was no way I would fall for it again. But, even though I understood the trap, the difficulty of this quest was still high.

After all, even without taking into account the difference in our equipment, the female bandit was someone capable of taking on four merchants alone. If one didn’t coordinate and try to fight together with the lizardmen merchants, a beginner would be quickly killed.

That said, I was not a beginner. Even if my stats had been reset, I hadn't been playing so casually that I'd have a tough time with an early game opponent. It was impossible for me to lose.

Or so I thought…

(Something feels strange.)

The insecurity I had been feeling for a while reached its max.

Where I was now, I could see the faces of the lizardmen as well as the ferocious smile of the female bandit in clear detail. This time, I was able to clearly identify the source of my unease.

—It was *too* realistic.

The texture of the smoothly connected lizardmen's scales. The drops of sweat that flew every time the female bandit moved. The feeling of weight every time two weapons collided. Everything was, compared to a few minutes ago before I was transported to the Forest of Beginnings, incomparably more realistic.

Even in a VR game providing realistic video data, there was a limit. No matter how realistic the developers tried to make it seem, in the end a game is just a recreation and one could immediately tell that it was a game.

But right now, the scenery in front of my eyes did not give off any sense of being from a game.

Even though it was an extremely unrealistic scene of lizardmen fighting against a female bandit, I could only see it as something that was happening in reality.

Actually, that was not all. The sunlight shining on my face, the wind that brushed against my skin, the sound of rustling leaves, the rich smell of grass, everything my five senses were telling me screamed out that this place I was currently standing in was undoubtedly a part of reality.

It was as if this was not the creation of a computer processor, but I had actually entered a real fantasy world…

(A fantasy, world…?)

Something clicked.

Right before this happened, what were Maki's last words?

"If you like your games so much, why don't you just go live in one, you jerk!"

Could it be, could it be, those words…

"Ah!"

Consumed with my own thoughts, I committed an unbelievable blunder. With a loud clatter, I dropped the sword in my hand.

"!?"

Both the female bandit and the lizardmen noticed my presence, and simultaneously turned towards me. I hastily picked up my sword, but it was already too late.

Exposed to five gazes that could hardly be called friendly, I froze in place.

Oh crap—I thought.

The hostility emitted by the female bandit could only be described as a killing intent, and together with the stares from the lizardmen's emotionless eyes, I felt feelings I had never experienced in a game before. For the first time, I became acutely aware that the scimitar, knives, and other weapons that they wielded were indeed actual weapons capable of claiming people's lives.

My sweat dripped onto the sword that I picked up. This was supposed to be where I fought together with the lizardmen to drive off the female bandit, but given the current situation, would the lizardmen really consider me an ally?

Like the female bandit, I was a human. Furthermore, I came from the same direction as the bandit. Thinking about it logically, wouldn't they mistake me as an ally of the bandit instead?

The NPCs in this game moved according to a program, so there was no need to ponder so hard about it. I used to placate myself by thinking this way.

But, if this was a just a computer game, then the female bandit and lizardmen would not care about something like the sound of

a fallen object, and would have continued fighting. The fact that they turned around on hearing a sword drop was extremely strange.

In any case, it would be bad to stay silent. Driven by that sense of desperation, I tried to say something, even though I could think of nothing to say.

"…Ah, um."

However, there was no need for that.

"-Tch!"

Clicking her tongue, the female bandit took action. Without hesitation, she turned away from the lizardmen. It seemed like she was about to retreat, aware of the dangers of a pincer attack.

I'm saved, I thought, but I was too naive. She had not given up on fighting. She merely changed the priorities of her targets. Her next target was…

"M-me!?"

In order to avoid the dangers of a pincer attack, it seemed that she planned to first eliminate me, the unpredictable factor, before later moving on to the lizardmen.

It was a decision like *one that a real person would have made*. But, I had no time to dwell on thoughts like that.

(Is she really coming for me? You've got to be kidding!)

I felt a ferocity that I had never felt before in my life from the approaching female bandit. This was probably what is called a murderous intent.

I willed myself to do something, anything, but my numbed body would not move.

“A-ahh…”

The female bandit drew closer. The scimitar in her hand exuded a sinister glow, while her ruthless smile told that she was all but certain of her victory.

Seeing that impending figure, my instincts called out.

(If I don’t do something, I will be killed!)

Thoughts like “it’s just a game so it’s okay even if I die” or “the opponent is just an NPC controlled by a program” were blown away before the overwhelming reality of the approaching female bandit.

(It’s okay. If I just handle this normally, handle this like how I always do in the game, it should be fine.)

I desperately tried to reassure myself, but my body, overwhelmed with nervousness, still would not move.

During this entire time, the female bandit loomed closer and closer. The gap that had been at least ten meters was now close to zero.

“Die!”

Having reached right before me, the female bandit swung her sword with the intent to kill.

A real killing intent. An authentic blade. Seeing those, I…

“Step!”

At the impending attack, I half-reflexively activated the movement skill , retreating backwards.

The swing by the female bandit was actually not all that fast. At least, if I had been playing the game as usual, I could probably have dodged it without using any skills.

Even if I were to use Step, normally I would have probably jumped to the side instead of backwards.

But, driven by fear, I moved backwards.

“Hah!”

In response, a sneer appeared on the female bandit’s face.

A shiver ran down my spine.

(The after-cast stun!)

From her ominous smile, I could tell what the female bandit was aiming for.

Step is an excellent evasion skill in emergencies, but it leaves an opening during the after-cast stun after its use. Letting out an attack expecting to be dodged with Step, then following up with the real blow was the opponent’s plan.

However, knowing the opponent's intentions still does not let me undo a skill that was already cast. Step gives a huge instant burst of speed, but outside of the initial burst it wasn't all that fast.

Dashing, the female bandit easily caught up to me.

"This is the end. Slash!"

Wearing a victorious smile, the female bandit activated an offensive skill.

Slash was one of the starting skills, but its power could not be compared to normal attacks. Taking into account the difference in stats between the female bandit and me, this one strike was more than enough to claim my life.

As the blade approached, I thought to myself.

Ahh, why am I hesitating over whether my experience in the game could be used here?

That, in such an overly realistic and severe situation, knowledge and experience from a game…

“Slash!!”

would end up being the only thing protecting my life was something that I had never doubted!

“Wha!?”

The Slash that I unleashed a moment later than the female bandit ended up reaching its target a moment earlier than her Slash. Though my blow was blocked by her armor and did not do much damage, as a result of the impact it interrupted the opponent’s strike.

Why did my skill hit first even though it was activated later?

As someone with no game knowledge, the female bandit probably couldn’t even imagine how. There was no way she would even think that *connecting* a Step into a Slash would omit the wind up animation and speed up activation.

What’s more, my attack did not stop there. No way I would let it end there.

The Slash cut splendidly across the opponent's body, and just as the strike was coming to an end, in that instant,

"Step!"

I did not miss that *cancel point*, as I cancelled into a Step, overwriting the Slash's motion.

Once more, the female bandit's face was filled with surprise.

Both Slash and Step, though basic, were both considered skills. As skills, in return for powerful effects, they are accompanied by openings during the long wind up animation and the after-cast stun that comes at the end. Even in the instruction manual, it was written clearly that "skills are powerful, but due to the strain it puts on your body you will be unable to perform any actions for a short while".

Normally one wouldn't even be able to move after using a skill, so to use another skill that forces your body even further beyond its limits would be unthinkable.

…That is, if you thought about this realistically.

But, *I am the only one who knows this world is a game*.

In games, there is a technique, or rather a system, called *cancelling*.

Originally born from fighting games, this system had recently become incorporated into various games with action in them. Its effect is that during the middle or perhaps the end of an

animation, by starting a new animation the gap from the first animation could be skipped.

Of course, being one of the newest VR games, “New Communicate Online” came equipped with this system.

Thus, having wrapped diagonally behind the female bandit using Step, the moment my two feet touched ground I yelled once again.

“Slash!”

Ordinarily, both Step and Slash come with a short, less than 1 second, but fatal opening. Due to that stun, it is also impossible to combo them together.

However, I was able to use cancelling to connect the two together and avoid the opening.

“!!”

If, at this moment, the female bandit was able to spare a glance over her shoulder, this time her eyes would probably have been wide open with shock.

In the first place Slash was an attack that involved swinging from top to bottom. But my arm was already facing downwards after the first Slash, so it should have been impossible to move my arm back up in such a short time.

Even I don’t know how exactly my arm moved. All I know is that the moment I yelled Slash, my arm was already in position above my head.

“G-ah!”

Empowered with the skill, my sword was sucked straight into her unprotected back.

The unforeseen attack from an unexpected location left the helpless female bandit collapsed on the ground.

“I’ll leave the rest to you!”

Hearing my yell, the astounded lizardmen watching our fight came back to their senses.

“G-get ‘er!”

With a command from what seemed to be the leader of the lizardmen, time started flowing again. The four lizardmen all came flying and captured the still immobilized female bandit.

I gazed onwards at that sight, unable to move. My heart beat fast and my breaths were shallow. These were obvious signs that I was out of stamina.

Through cancels you can chain skills together, but the resulting impact on stamina expenditure can be harsh. While breathing heavily, I focused my efforts on recovering my strength.

It was harder than normal to breathe. A sense of suffocation that I had never experienced in a VR space assaulted my chest.

Even then, I looked towards the captured female bandit surrounded by the lizardmen and spat out towards nobody in particular.

“How many tens of hours do you think I spent practicing Step cancelling? Don’t underestimate us hardcore gamers!”

Part 4.

As the battle passed and the excitement died down, the weight of the matter slowly dawned upon me.

After ensuring that the female bandit was secured, the lizardmen merchants offered me a ride to the town on their wagon. Taking up that offer and riding together with them on their wagon, I grabbed my head in my mind.

It wasn’t just the scenery outside the window, the smell of the forest, or the sound of the wind. The human-like responses to the changes in situation from the female bandit; the solid feeling of impact as your strike landed on the opponent; the chest pains from the loss of breath that should have been controlled and limited by the VR machine; and furthermore, the vibrations and the small vertical movements that could be felt as this wagon advanced.

Various small things that could have been, or rather probably should have been, omitted from a game now manifested themselves in front of me as reality.

I could no longer ignore the matter anymore.

Right now, I was not “playing a game”.

I was “in the world of the game”.

It may be hard to believe, but I could not think of any other explanations for the current situation.

The changes that made this world seem like reality were at a level that couldn't be explained by a surprise patch, yet on the other hand, this world followed the rules of the game surprisingly accurately.

But more than anything, what brought me to this conclusion was the conversation that I had exchanged with Maki right before this all happened.

At that time, Maki was holding what could have been the Lucky Mallet. According to legends, the Lucky Mallet possesses a power that can grant any wish as it is swung.

Right before the changes happened, this was what Maki had said.

"If you like your games so much, why don't you just go live in one, you jerk!"

Considering the situation, it could be deduced that Maki, being fed up with what I had said, yelled out those words while swinging the Lucky Mallet in anger.

Fitting the requirements of "saying a wish while swinging the mallet", the Lucky Mallet did as Maki's words directed and sent me into the world of a game.

"Ugh, this is absurd…"

Considering all this, I thought to myself.

Even if alternate worlds existed somewhere, it was hard to believe that there would just happen to exist such a place that was identical to Nekomimineko. If that's the case, then probably in the moment that Maki made her wish, the Lucky Mallet created a world identical to that of Nekomimineko, and on top of that it sent me there.

In which case, just to grant the wish that my cousin said out of spite, a whole new world was created. Seriously, how absurd.

Even ignoring all that, to be sent to some random world just because of some stupid gag-comic-like incident is seriously not something to laugh at.

Actually, thinking about it more, this is really a situation that can't be laughed at.

(Why, out of everything, did it have to be this game!!)

Nekomimineko was not your ordinary game. Events that were made just to trouble the player sat waiting around every corner, the game balance was ridiculous from start to finish, and as a bonus instadeath level bugs were scattered everywhere. It was the worst game.

I don't know exactly how many times I had cleared data and restarted from the very beginning, but my deaths probably easily numbered in the hundreds. Including the mid-game resets and loads, that number definitely surpassed a thousand.

In this game, where even level 300s regularly die, right now I had only a beginner's status, starting back at level 1.

It was as if I were being told to conquer this game with no mistakes and no resets with the fear of death looming in my mind in this game world that had now become reality.

(There's no way I could do something like that!)

Facing this sudden reality, my face turned pale.

"Wass wrong? Are syou alright?"

One of the lizardman merchants called to me in concern.

"No, I'm okay, Mr. Reinhart."

I somehow gathered my thoughts and replied with a smile to the leader of the merchants, Reinhart.

"Is that sso. Well, if theres anything bothering syou, les me know. Yous are our ssavior. We wills do what swe can."

In the hard-to-understand accent unique to lizardmen, the actually quite handsome-looking Reinhart said.

Actually, with a cool name like Reinhart and his accommodating personality, could this person be a hunk of the lizardmen world?

(…Hmm)

When this was just a simple game, nobody would call out to me when I was down like this. There might be many other differences now compared to when it was a game.

It's a good chance that I was able to meet someone friendly. If I let this opportunity pass by, then I'd be sure to regret it.

"In that case, there are some things I'd like to ask."

Deciding to gather some information from Reinhart and the lizardmen, I opened my mouth.

Having spoken with the lizardmen, I was able to understand a few things.

From the conversation we had in the wagon at least, it seemed that they, who were supposed to be simply AI-controlled NPCs in game, were now equipped with knowledge comparable to a human in the real world.

Rather, Reinhart who had journeyed to a variety of places had a knack for storytelling, and even with his blunt tone of voice I found myself getting sucked into his stories.

That said, not all of their knowledge was the same as in reality. They accepted things like HP, levels, skills, and such game constructs as normal. As expected, they were not able to open the menu screen, so in order to determine these values they needed to use certain items.

However, even though they accepted the various “elements of a game” that filled this world, they did not seem to have the notion that “this world was a game”. Though, this was something that was true since back when this game was a game, so it’s not really something surprising.

Touching on subjects outside of the people, this was most definitely in the same setting as the game I played, the Kingdom of Licht.

Not just the geography and place names, but when I tried to confirm what I remembered about Licht's history and customs and such, what Reinhart spoke of matched everything in my memories, except that he was able to tell them with a much higher level of detail than what I remembered. It perfectly matched the game's setting down to the minutiae, even the parts that were just randomly decided by the game staff and made no sense when thinking realistically.

By the way, the language used in this kingdom was the Continental Common Language, which in essence was just modern Japanese. Given that New Communicate Online was a Japanese game, this decision seemed obvious, but either way I was grateful that I did not need to worry about a language barrier.

From their side they also asked quite a few things about my background, but I just dodged the questions saying that I was a traveller from afar. In this world filled with demi-humans and people with weird hair colors oft seen in games, black hair and black eyes were possibly rare in return, but it didn't seem like they thought it was something worth prying into.

The question from Reinhart that troubled me the most was with respect to the skill comboing I did when I defeated the female bandit, but I just replied in turn that it was my trump card so I couldn't talk much about it, and if possible they were not to speak of it to anyone else, and he obediently complied.

Now that I think about it, I've never seen NPCs use skill cancelling in the game. Since there doesn't seem to be any merits in standing out too much, I silently decided to control my usage of cancelling as much as possible when in people's sights.

"…We're almoss there."

After having chatted for a while, Reinhart suddenly jerked as if having felt something, and gazed out of the window.

Following his lead, I also stuck my head out of the wagon and looked forwards.

As I did so, I was able to take in a familiar giant gate, and the outer walls that surrounded the town in front of us.

"That's…"

The entrance to the Kingdom of Licht, and the very first town of Nekomimineko, Ramlich.

…I wonder why.

A giant gate that one would not be able to find in Japan. A sturdy wall that protected people from the threat of monsters. Behind those were tall European-style buildings that I had seen before in game.

More than the female bandit and the lizardmen, more than even seeing real weapons and armor, these felt overwhelmingly "real".

It was at this point that finally I came to acknowledge it.

It seems…

(…I've really come to "another world".)

Extra.

Extracts from NekomimimekoWiki ››› "Common Bugs FAQ"

Q: I just can't seem to kill the Red Mushrooms in the Forest of Beginnings! Is this a bug?

A: It's a bug. We believe that the staff accidentally put an extra zero in its defense stat. If you meet one, either run away or defeat it with magic.

Q: I obtained a sword named the Silver Knight's Sword, but when I equip it I lose the ability to use sword skills. Is this a bug?

A: It's a bug. No matter how you look at it the Silver Knight's Sword is a sword, but it's classified as an axe. Either equip a different weapon, or take this opportunity and switch to being an axe-wielder.

Q: In the middle of my quest, an NPC that was supposed to be dead appeared! Is this a bug?

A: It's a common bug in Nekomimineko. While wishing them well in the afterlife, let's burn their final valiant appearance in our minds. That said, as it increases the possibility of unrecoverable problems, please try to refrain from killing NPCs as much as possible.

Chapter 1 – The Town of Ramlich.

Part 1.

New Communicate Online, commonly known as Nekomimineko, was well known as the shittiest game of the century. Many legends had been born from this game, but if you asked what the most impressive one of them was, then you'd surely hear the point "it's single player" mentioned.

Even though the title contains words like Communicate and Online, not only is it not a MMO, there's not even a single function in the game that allows you to interact with other people. Quite shocking.

I had done a bit of searching on the web before, and it seemed that the company had once created some Communicate something-or-another that was neither VR nor MMO, but rather an action game series. When they decided to work on a sequel, they wanted to create something in the currently popular VRMMO genre, and that's how New Communicate Online was started.

A new VRMMO in the Communicate series, thus New Communicate Online. It was a straightforward name.

Except, as expected, the production company had no know-how on creating MMOs and, especially with VRMMOs, the regulations had become rather strict ever since that cyber-terrorism case (they took over a part of the servers of a VRMMO game, and forcefully exposed strong lights and sounds to the players.

Though there were no fatalities, many people lost consciousness and were hospitalized.). In the end, it seemed that the company gave up due to technical problems, and redeveloped it as a single player VR game.

Then you'd think they'd at least change the title, but it seemed that after considering things like having to redo advertisements and such, they recklessly decided to just stick with it. Even now, I'm amazed that this game was able to pass the regulations.

That said, the fact that an anticipated VR game had become single player was actually a plus to me at the time.

I was able to stick to being alone through college, so why should I be forced to deal with other people inside of a game world?

Harboring such thoughts, I bought New Communicate Online on its release day in high spirits amidst the laments from the many people who had been hoping for multiplayer support.

But, it wasn't until then that the game's claim to fame had really started. The product that was sold was filled with bugs and could barely function as a game. It was the most horrible product ever.

Characters randomly teleporting while you were talking to them or characters that were supposed to be dead showing up based on the ordering of events were daily occurrences, and the secret technique *Grey's Shadow Clones*, where, by fulfilling the required conditions and triggering three specific events at the same time, three of the same NPC would appear was a bug that had brought awkward laughter to many people.

It would have been fine if all the bugs were at the level that could be dismissed with a laugh, but many bugs were found that completely prevented progress through the game. For example, if you threw away a certain quest item that looked like a junk item, then there was no way of reobtaining it, making it impossible to clear the game. Similarly, if you tried to work through two quest lines at the same time and they involved the same NPC, it was possible that your progression on one of those quest lines could be lost, making it impossible to clear the game.

These bugs were not only limited to the story and quests. One of this game's catchlines was that one could experience exhilarating battles with the use of seemingly infinite skills, but even the battle system was pretty sketchy.

Starting with the worst one, it would have to be the monsters' death animation. When dying, monsters turn into particles of light and disappear, but the animation was so choppy that it caused the speed at which the monsters disappeared to be abnormally slow, so sometimes you would get attacked by monsters that were supposed to be dead.

Of course, monsters didn't start performing new actions after they had died, but if they had started their attack animation right before dying, then the attack would continue even after they died. As a result, the number of players killed by monsters with 0 HP kept growing, and this bug became one reason for New Communicate Online's lack of popularity.

There was more.

Raising your weapon mastery was supposed to be a core part of battles, but for some reason using swords raised the mastery for axes. You could use axe skills with a spear, but for some reason when wielding a bow you were unable to use bow skills. Finally, when it was discovered that the power from skills was completely unaffected by your weapon mastery level, many players who had been playing the game seriously cried out in frustration.

The game balance was also all over the place. Struggling to take down a tough rare monster might only give the same amount of exp as a normal mob monster and, on the other hand, in some dungeons unimpressive small fries give more exp than the dungeon's boss. There were dungeons that contained nearly no enemies due to monsters randomly falling to their deaths. There were also cases where, due to a mistake in the parameter settings, the boss of a difficult dungeon would, for some reason, spawn normally in a low level field, leading to a festival of death.

The highly anticipated skills hyped up by the beautiful and spectacular effects shown in a pre-release demo video were, of course, not without its own share of problems.

The most well-known bug regarding skills was commonly referred to as the Anakin Skywalker Incident where, by using Air Jump after fulfilling a certain set of conditions, you would be able to walk in the air, though with the drawback that, based on

the situation, it was possible that the only way to return to the ground would be through committing suicide. Other than this, skill bugs numbering as many as the stars have been discovered.

Not surprisingly, there were bugs that gave the light from some skills' visual effects a physical presence, or ones that made some skills' actual range not match with its animations and visual effects. Out of these, bugs that were particularly unique were discussed at great lengths in online forums and, as a result, certain groups of people started giving them interesting names.

An especially famous example is the Forbidden Combo: Death Flash, where, if you manage to observe two certain magic spells with particularly intense effects at the same time, due to the excessive sound and light from the effects, the security system that was added after the cyber-terrorism incident will kick in and forcibly log you out.

Then there's the Illusionary Wide Slash, where the visual effects make it look like you are attacking an area extending five meters out, but the actual attack doesn't even reach two meters.

For some reason this skill's effect range always overlaps with your character's hitbox, killing you with a high chance the moment you use the skill – Instant Suicide: Bloody Stab.

Or like the Sword of Life: Assassin's Rage, which actually heals the target as you attack, probably due to an input mistake causing the damage multiplier to become negative; lots of strange skills had been found.

But, even within the group of people that could overlook those bugs because, in a sense, they were fun to discuss, many gave up when it came to the all-important gameplay.

Let's make this clear – the creators who set up the scenarios and gimmicks were not half-hearted sadists. From the unreasonable instant-death traps that would be absolutely impossible to avoid the first time you run into them, or quests that not only gave no sense of accomplishment but rather made you depressed when you cleared them, to events that had no way to be cleared due to an oversight in the setup, or important characters being killed by environmental damage with complete disregard to the story flow, or autosaving right after an event that forced almost all of your party members to leave, many situations made you want to say, "This was definitely created just for the purpose of torturing players." With game content that seemed like the developers wanted to cram in everything that should never be done in an RPG, players with any normalcy kept leaving one after another.

Even the game system itself contained many points of frustration for the players.

For example, let's look at the character creation flow. The fact that character names could not contain numbers was just the beginning. Then, when it came to the customization of the character's looks which many people considered an important feature, this game only offered the choice of changing hair color, skin color, and the accessory that was attached on the head.

Everything else was determined through the player's own physical data saved within the VR machine.

Not only that, but there were only three choices each for hair color and skin color, even though there were a total of eight different cat ear designs available for the head accessory. Comments like "they're totally focusing on the wrong things" or "just how much do they like cat ears" flooded 2chan.

It was definitely around that time when the name Nekomimi Cat Offline started being used around the web as a pun on New Communicate Online.

As the commotion died down, New Communicate Online's nickname became the affectionate Nekomimineko, or sometimes things like Nekomemeneko.

…Actually, I'm not sure if the name contained any affection.

Since the game turned out being what it was, as expected the complaints to the production company kept flowing in, such as "Give me my money back!" "What part of this is online!" "Do something about the bugs!" "It suddenly became black and I can't move. What should I do?" "Do you even care about the players!!!!" The backlash was so extreme that some news channels even covered this on TV.

Perhaps ironically, this uproar was what resulted in Nekomimineko finally becoming an "online game". In order to receive the bug fix patches, an internet connection was required,

and without the bug fixes it was not possible to properly play through the game.

One after another, new patches were released, and with each patch the new bugs that were found numbered more than the bugs fixed. As the number of patches surpassed ten, most players had given up on this game.

Even those users on the internet who derived much joy from making a fuss about the bugs – in a sense this game's number one fans – eventually went away with the hype and started searching for a different crappy game to beat up.

…The festival was over.

Even then, I continued to play this game.

There weren't really any other single player fantasy VRRPG games, but more than anything I had fallen in love with Nekomimineko.

One year after its initial release, Nekomimineko was indeed still a defective product. The version number had stopped increasing at v1.37, and the bugs that prevented progression through the game had only barely been roughly fixed, while the bugs that had been deemed low priority such as the skill bugs had mostly been left untouched.

But, if you changed the way you looked at it, that was this game's appeal.

The bugs were actually just another feature. Sure, this game was full of bugs, the game balance was all over the place, and the scenario was warped. At first I had thought about quitting multiple times due to the unfair events and overall difficulty.

However, one time, when I pulled through a pinch that could never have been overcome through normal means with a strategy that the producers doubtlessly hadn't imagined possible, I had come to realize something.

Against the evil events, the crazy game balance, and the bugs that make you feel hopeless, I felt the gratification that came from conquering everything with one's own tact and insight.

This joy from surmounting these unreasonable obstacles that did not have a correct path provided, sometimes through brute force, sometimes through intellect, and sometimes through exploiting bugs, was something that one would definitely not be able to find in other games.

I had waded into the sea of information on the net gathering more information than anyone else, devoting pretty much all my time outside of going to classes to Nekomimineko. It would not be an exaggeration to say that over 80% of my university life had been spent on Nekomimineko.

Still, to think that…

"I can't believe I'm seriously going to be literally living in the game…"

I inadvertently muttered out loud, then laughed wryly at myself.

After Reinhart dropped me off at the town of Ramlich, I had done some more investigating on my own. As a result, I was able to conclude that this world that I was currently in was an astonishingly faithful reproduction of New Communicate Online's world.

To give an example, there's the pouch around my waist. The moment I reached my hands in there, an image of two flasks containing either red fluid and blue fluid appeared in my mind. Imagining the blue flask and removing my hand from the pouch, there in my hand was a flask filled with blue liquid.

This was, of course, the stamina potion that I had since the start of the game, but that was not the point. Even though I had taken out such a large item, the pouch's size and weight had not changed.

If such a thing happened in the real world, it was either a magic trick or a supernatural occurrence. Just from this, I was able to determine that this was a different world from my old world.

Furthermore,

"It's a bit of a waste but… Umpf!"

I continued by throwing the potion with full force towards the ground.

The potion bottle shattered on the ground, and with a loud crash the fragments of the bottle flew in all directions… was not what happened. A blue light expanded from the place that the potion

had hit, and around a second later, an unremarkable *pwong* sound effect echoed.

Bending over and carefully investigating, there was not a single shard of glass around where the potion had shattered. The potion had disappeared without a trace.

In Nekomimineko, there were three ways of using a potion.

They were: drink it, apply it, or throw it.

Drinking the contents would of course apply its effects, and pouring it over a wound would also work. Finally, to use it on a companion while in the middle of battle, you could just throw the potion. It was something that was unthinkable in real life, but if one was hit strongly with a potion, the potion would disappear along with the flask while rejuvenating the target.

With just this, it was clear that this world did not obey the real world's laws of physics, but rather behaved according to the game's laws. But that was not all.

There was a famous and still unfixed bug in Nekomimineko when a potion is thrown.

It was known as the "Sound… Is… Lagged" bug.

I don't know what or how one would have to screw up to introduce something like this, but for some reason when a potion hit something, there was an approximately 1 second lag between the visual effect and the sound effect. That's right, just like what I had witnessed moments ago.

—In other words, this world was, along with all the bugs, a complete reproduction of New Communication Online.

Out of all of the game's functionalities, the only one that could not be used was the menu screen.

The reason was unclear, but it wasn't like I had absolutely no idea. My guess was that the save, load, and logout functionalities that could be accessed from the menu screen were too meta, or rather *too game-like*.

Skills and magic could be explained through a fantasy world setting, and levels and HP could be said to be just a numeric representation of a person's strength. However, the menu screen and the save/load functionality were different. They were concepts that could only be realized in a fictional world, and were unfitting of a world that was supposed to actually exist.

That's why only these features were rejected when this world was created, was what I freely imagined, but I don't know what the truth is. I just know that since the menu can't be used, I will need to keep that in mind as I act.

Being unable to open the menu brings with it a lot of troubles. There are, of course, many problems related to character status, but by far the largest problem is the inability to save and load. I actually tried many times at the town's monolith which acted as a save point, but no matter what I did I couldn't get the save menu to appear. Save and load could not be used.

That meant there were no second chances.

Having died over and over and over in the game to a point where it would be dumb to even try to count how many times I had died, I clearly remembered what happens after dying. After the player dies, their vision turns black and they lose control of their character, and a menu screen opens with choices to load or to return to the title screen. If, fundamentally, menu screens could not be used, then, once you die…

(Damn it, you've got to be kidding me!)

Not being able to use the menu screen also means that it is not possible to logout, to issue the command to stop the VR machine and return to reality.

Though it's possible to have someone operate the VR machine from the real world or to trigger the VR machine's safety device, the main method for someone in VR space to return to reality is this command.

Meaning, the method that had the highest chance of returning me to my old world had been blocked even before I was able to try it.

(The old world. The old world, huh…)

I thought hard about the old world.

Well, I mostly keep to myself at university, and rarely keep in contact with my family. If I can't return within a few weeks then it looks hopeless for my first semester's credits, but that isn't something that can't be recovered from.

If you asked me what my biggest regret regarding this world was, then I would probably answer the fact that there wouldn't be a continuation to Nekomimineko. The current situation would, in a sense, let me do whatever I wanted with Nekomimineko, so that was one thing I didn't need to worry about anymore. …Not that that makes me happy about this situation.

(Even then, I need to somehow return to reality, return to my world!)

It was one thing to enjoy it as a game, but to actually live in it, the Nekomimineko world was too ruthless.

Just as I had made my decision to return to the old world no matter what, a gust of wind blew through the gaps in the house.

"S-So cold!"

The cold evening wind assaulted my body mercilessly. In the game there was no sense of temperature, but now that this world has become reality, that was no longer the case.

"…Well, I'll start working hard from tomorrow onwards. For now, let's just rest at the inn."

Having quickly become disheartened by the unexpected impediment, I speedily headed towards the inn.

Part 2.

"This is a problem. I'm out of money."

I was able to successfully wiggle my way into a room at the one and only inn in this town, but the rent in this game was abnormally high. For that reason, I had used up most of the money I had.

In the game, you would recover HP if you lied down anywhere, so theoretically there was no need to stay in an inn, but now that this world had become reality, as the night settled in, the temperature would probably get even harsher. But more than anything, in this world that was no longer a game, my pride would not allow sleeping in the streets.

Thinking about the future, I decided that I would like at least a few days' worth of living expenses.

(Maybe I should have asked Reinhart to cover my hotel fee at least?)

Such thoughts came to mind, but it was already too late for that.

There was the option of earning money from fighting monsters, but in this world, fighting meant risking my life. If possible, I would like to be as prepared as I could be before attempting it.

(Isn't there anything? A safe way to earn some money in this town…)

In my mind was an excessively large clump of information about Nekomimineko. Wondering if there was anything useful there, I concentrated my thoughts on the quests and the contents of treasure chests within the town of Ramlich.

That said, the easily obtainable quests and chests usually have quite unimpressive contents, so there wouldn't be something so conveniently…

"…Ah."

There was something.

A quest that could be completed without any fighting and without taking a single step outside this town, while on the other hand giving a decent amount of money.

"Thief Melipe's Legacy."

If you have ever read detective novels or adventure novels, you may have come across extremely elaborate dying messages or treasure maps full of secrets.

Sometimes there are even logical reasons behind these things, but thinking about it calmly, would anyone actually be able to leave such brilliant yet incoherent messages at their moment of death, and wouldn't it be fine not to draw such detailed maps in a memo meant for their own use?

Either way, Thief Melipe's Legacy was such a story implemented in this game as a quest. "Having betrayed his comrades and escaped with the treasures, Melipe was caught and killed, but no matter how much they searched, the treasures Melipe stole could not be found. Having obtained the notebook that Melipe had left behind by chance, you also start searching for the treasure guided by the hints written within."

Such were the contents of the quest. It was very much the story of a standard treasure-seeking quest.

The problem with this quest was that after sneaking through 3 different dungeons, what awaited you at the end was a conclusion that would even surprise The Blue Bird: “The treasure is actually buried in the backyard of Melipe’s house!!”

Why bother drawing a map to something that was hidden in your backyard?! You actually wanted someone to find the treasure didn’t you! Or rather, those people that had been searching so hard for Melipe’s treasure should thoroughly check his backyard at least! There were lots of things that I had wanted to retort, but for now at least I was thankful for that.

–Actually, this house that Melipe lived in was right behind this inn.

A few moments later,

“It’s here, right?”

I had arrived in the yard that I recognized from the game.

It felt a bit different since I had never visited it in the night before, but it was probably the right place.

In Nekomimineko, unless there was a special event, usually it was not possible to take any actions that dig through the ground or break any walls. Even in Thief Melipe’s Legacy, unless you found the hints in each of the 3 dungeons and completed the

event's prerequisites, it was impossible to dig the treasure out of the yard. But this world was now reality, so there should no longer be such a restriction.

"By the roots of the tree… here I guess?"

Marking a location, I stabbed my sword down. Putting in power and pushing the sword a few tens of centimeters in, I was rewarded with the feeling of hitting something hard.

"Jackpot?"

Hiding my inner excitement, I proceeded to dig out the buried object with the sword and my bare hands.

Still, looking at my actions objectively, right now, I was digging through someone's backyard in the darkness. This was definitely extremely suspicious behavior.

Combined with the guilty feelings I had from skipping the entire quest, I had somehow gotten the idea that I was doing something bad.

Trying to finish it as soon as possible, I frantically dug into the earth.

The dirt was harder than I had imagined, and it was rather hard work to dig into it, but fortunately the treasure wasn't buried very deep.

After just a few minutes, I had in front of me a small treasure chest.

"Heh, hehe, I did it…"

Even though I barely did anything at all, I felt like I had done something amazing.

I glanced around at my surroundings. Luckily, it didn't look like anyone had seen me.

Stealthily, I reached for the chest. Weighing it in my hand, it was surprisingly heavy. Quickly, the weight I felt in my hand changed into the anticipation of its contents. This event was one that took place in the mid game. The contents were indeed something worth looking forward to.

But, that was all the more reason to make sure I was extra careful. Once again, I glanced at the surroundings. …It didn't seem like anyone was watching.

"There's nobody secretly spying on me, is there?"

My current stats were not by any means high. If attacked by any half decent thief, honestly I had no chance of winning.

Wait, Melipe's incident was supposed to have happened more than fifty years ago. There was probably nobody who knows about the existence of the treasure anymore, or who holds claims to this chest now. There's no reason for anyone to be guarding it, and to begin with there's probably nobody that knows this chest contains treasure. I'm not even digging anymore, so I shouldn't seem too suspicious.

Mm, there are no problems… I hope.

"It's alright, it's alright."

There's nothing to worry about. Having cast away all my feelings of fear, I looked around with a composed expression.

…See? Nobody's around.

Still, there's nothing wrong with being extra careful. After looking around one last time, I speedily left the place, hugging the chest and bending forward so that nobody could see it.

It wasn't until after I returned to the inn that I realized it probably would've made me seem even more suspicious.

"Oh! Welcome back, kid! Tonight's dinner is…"

"Sorry! I'll come down later!"

Quickly dismissing the inn owner, I entered my room holding the chest.

Even though I hadn't done anything strenuous, I was completely out of breath.

I remembered once Maki had talked about how, when she had to carry $200 to school for some event fee or something, everyone she met on the way seemed like a mugger to her.

At that moment, I had thought to myself "There's no need to get so paranoid over a mere $200," but right now I felt like I could relate to her feelings.

Of course, I wasn't acting anywhere near as paranoid as that, just that well, if it's around 10% of those feelings then I can't really say that I don't understand them at all.

"A-Alright…!"

Placing the treasure chest on the bed, I took a position in front of it.

I was able to successfully secure the chest, but that was only half of the work. On the center of this brown chest was a combination lock, and it was not possible to open it without knowing the correct pattern.

"Let's do this?"

I clearly remembered the numbers.

12076.

Having muttered it to myself over and over again while doing Thief Melipe's Legacy before, I had completely memorized it.

There was just one problem…

"It's gonna be bad if I mess up though."

If you try to open the chest with an incorrect combination, you will receive a high voltage electric shock. With my current status, if I got hit by something like that then, without a doubt, I would instantly die.

Still, it wasn't easy getting this in my hands, and it'd be a problem if it got stolen from me because I tried to consult with someone.

I held my breath as I adjusted the numbers.

"…1…2…0…7…6."

After adjusting the numbers, I confirmed it once again.

1, 2, 0, 7, 6.

Mm, looks fine. All the numbers were aligned, there wasn't any disc stuck halfway between two notches.

With this, there shouldn't be any more problems.

"Okay, let's open it?"

I placed my two hands on the sides of the chest.

If I were to just lift my hands up then the chest would open. Either that or I get burnt black.

No, that won't happen.

I was confident that the numbers were right. All that's left between me and Melipe's treasure was opening this chest a little bit.

I stared intently at the chest.

12076.

The numbers didn't change. This should be fine.

But wait, were these numbers actually correct?

What if it was actually 12067?

No way, something like that wasn't possible. After all, I remembered it so clearly.

"Haaaaa."

For the moment, I took my hands off the chest. Taking deep breaths, I wiped the sweat off of my hands.

"Calm down, I can do this!"

Saying that, I encouraged myself. I had thought about using a sword or something to open it, but I immediately reconsidered.

If it's electricity then using a sword was pointless.

In the first place, I was sure that the numbers were correct, so all that's left was the question of my bravery.

It's okay.

The chest was at the same location as in the game. Without a doubt the combination would be the same.

Making up my mind, I slowly put power into my two hands–

"Hey kid! Dinner's–"

"Uwahh!!"

Hearing someone call out from behind me made me suddenly jump up.

Turning around, the inn owner's surprised face was peeking out from behind the door.

"What's up with that scream? Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Wh-aw-h…!"

My lips flapped around, but no sound came out.

The inn owner complained about being surprised, but I was far more shocked. I thought my heart was about to fly out of my chest.

"A-At least knock before coming in!"

"Huh? Ah, sorry. I didn't expect the door to be unlocked, so, yeah. Oh right, I came to let you know that the table's all set for dinner."

Seeing him say these words while rubbing his smooth head, my anger dissipated.

Thinking about it, I did remember hearing that the fee included dinner. It was probably partly my fault for not researching the details.

"…Thanks. I'll be there soon, so could you wait for me downstairs?"

"Got it. Today there's only you and one other guest, so try to come quickly."

This inn seems to be quite unpopular…

"…Okay."

After confirming that the inn owner left the room and descended down the stairs, I returned to the room, this time making sure that the door was tightly locked, and once again set out to challenge the chest…

"What's this clichéd development…"

I knelt on the bed.

…The chest was open.

When I had jumped up on hearing the voice behind me, it seems that I had accidentally opened it.

Looking inside the chest, it was filled to the brim with glittering jewels and accessories.

The first day of my life inside a game.

–I had become rich.

Part 3.

The second day of my life inside a game.

After leaving the inn, the first place I headed to was the item shop.

Melipe's treasures contained large amounts of gems and accessories. From within them, I quickly equipped the rare Max Stamina Up and Stamina Recovery Up rings, and sold everything else without a second thought.

Being unable to come up with any safer way of carrying them around, I ended up heading to the shop with Melipe's treasures inside their original chest. Only when the last gem had been sold and the appropriate amount of Elements had been transferred to my crystal was I finally able to calm down.

Every time I rounded a corner, I had worried that a bandit was about to jump me, and every person I saw seemed like they were scheming about how to take the chest from me. With feelings like this, I really shouldn't have been laughing at Maki.

Even when I made it to the store, I was worried that the shopkeeper would be overtaken by greed and assault me, or that I was going to be scrupulously interrogated about how these treasures came into my possession, but nothing like that happened.

I received an amount of money that seemed to match roughly what I remembered from the game, and was seen out from the item shop by the owner saying, "Thank you for your visit!" with a perfect business smile.

By the way, in Nekomimineko's world, currency is stored in specialized crystals as magic power known as "Elements", and using this one can make purchases and conduct transactions.

With the advancement of magic in this world, it had reached a point where magic power was essential in making things or even starting a fire.

It was only logical that in such a world, the existence of a type of magic power that held a stable value would become the common currency, as it was much more practical than rare metals or jewels.

In other words, this was a system that was designed with the history of this fantasy world in mind… is what I would have liked to say, but I heard that it was the only way they could think of to somehow bring the payment card system that we were so used to in the modern day into the game.

In this day and age where paper money and coins were starting to go out of fashion, to have to count out the number of gold coins and silver coins to buy something would be unpleasant.

At least, I would find that annoying. Being able to buy something just by touching a crystal to something and having the correct amount deducted would be the best.

Even more importantly, the biggest advantage of this system was that there was no need to worry about theft. You would have to always keep an eye out if you were carrying gems, but once the money is in your crystal then it is impossible to steal your Elements without your permission.

In other words, I was finally able to rest easy.

Actually, to be technical, if the owner of the crystal died then that limitation was also removed, and there were also people who would be willing to kill to steal your money, but I decided not to think about that.

With this, the amount of money I hold is now 175000E.

Considering that I started out with 500E, this was a rather large improvement.

Quest rewards were generally determined based on the difficulty of the quest. Being a quest from the mid game, and requiring navigating three dungeons and solving puzzles to clear, the reward from Thief Melipe's Legacy was orders of magnitude bigger than what beginners would be used to.

Still, since this was Nekomimineko you couldn't always count on the game balance being sane, and there were quests where for a large amount of trouble you would get barely anything in return, but for Thief Melipe's Legacy the reward seemed reasonable for the amount of effort required.

Also, this is completely unrelated, but isn't setting the starting amount at 500E a bit too low?

Just staying a single night at the inn last night cost 400E, so it would mean that I set out on a journey with only a bit more than a day's worth of lodging. How reckless.

"Now I can buy some equipment… but first I have to pay a visit to Old Tuto, huh."

Old Tuto refers to a retired adventurer, and, as you can tell from the name, is a tutorial character. He's a useful character that teaches players about the rules of adventuring, and at the same time, provides adventurers with essential items, so the choice to not visit him was, well, nonexistent.

There are three items that Old Tuto gives.

Acting as your inventory in this world, able to hold way more things than looks possible, the Adventurer's Bag.

Acting as storage, almost unlimited in what you can put in it, the Item Box.

Finally, the quest item Mysterious Scrap of Paper.

Each and every one of them was an indispensable item for playing the game.

Especially if I was going to buy equipment, I would need the Adventurer's Bag. The Adventurer's Pouch that I had from the beginning was similar, but its purpose was for commonly used consumable items, and could only hold a total of 6 different types of items. To add on to this, it's also impossible to put large items like equipment in the Adventurer's Pouch.

Even the Adventurer's Bag has a limit on what it can hold, so when it comes to it, an Item Box is desirable. To be precise, what you obtain is the right to use one of the Item Boxes in town, and it is extremely useful for storing equipment and stuff that you can't use.

The last item, the Mysterious Scrap of Paper, is also quite important.

Though it looks just like an ordinary piece of scrap paper with some undecipherable scribbles on it, this was a required quest item for progressing through the story. Because it doesn't appear

to be that important, it becomes tempting to throw it away when the player's bag gets full, but doing that would result in the player getting stuck in the middle of the storyline.

What's even worse is that after a set amount of time after an item has been discarded, it disappears. Once that happens, it becomes impossible to clear the game.

The item had garnered quite a bit of attention when the patch released to fix the issue brought the problem to the players' attentions.

"…Mmm."

I really have a hard time dealing with that old man who was meddlesome, talkative, stubborn, and, only when it's convenient for him, hard of hearing, but there was no other choice than to go.

Yeah, I know it's quite presumptions to be complaining when I'm the one getting free items…

In the end, I changed direction, and headed straight towards Old Tuto's house.

A bit later, I successfully obtained the items from Old Tuto's place. There wasn't any particularly interesting new pieces of information, but let's just say that even in this world, Old Tuto was still Old Tuto.

"At last I can start assembling my equipment."

I lightly tapped the Adventurer's Bag that I just received.

In the same way as the Adventurer's Pouch, I was able to insert and remove items from the Adventurer's Bag. With this, I can shop for equipment without any more worries.

Still, what should I do?

None of the shops in Ramlich sold any useful pieces of equipment. Still, they were much better than the beginning equipment I had, and even with just them I think it would greatly reduce the time needed to gain levels, but if I was going to get something I might as well try for something better.

In that case, I would have to aim for either a quest reward or a monster drop, but the monsters around Ramlich are all low level, and the quests available are all quests from the early game. However, there were also exceptions like Thief Melipe's Legacy. As an extreme example, the hidden dungeon on the outskirts of the town that only opens after the main storyline had been cleared contained the game's top class enemies.

Obviously, with my current level and equipment, it would definitely be impossible to clear such a dungeon. But, depending on circumstances it may not be impossible to suddenly come across some strong equipment.

"In that case, I guess I should go to that place."

After drifting through all of that, my thoughts settled on a particular residence.

“To think that I would be coming here again…”

Guided by my vague memories, I arrived at a normal house that was situated slightly away from the town center.

However, what lay sleeping in this seemingly inconspicuous house was the unique weapon Shiranui that would probably even make it into the top three of my best weapons rankings. Though the words “unique weapon” sound strong, all that it means is that it was a one-of-a-kind item that could not be obtained through any other way.

Since Nekomimineko was not an online game, honestly, there was no point to having multiple copies of the same weapon, so it wasn’t actually all that rare for a weapon to be unique.

As an example, the Rusty Longsword (ATK 3) that I had equipped since the beginning could also not be obtained again, so it was also categorized as an unique weapon.

“This brings back memories…”

In this house lived an old man named Lang, and in contrast to Old Tuto, he was a calm and quiet person.

At the end of the Lang’s quest chain I would be able to obtain the blade I wanted, Shiranui, but this was again quite a troublesome series of quests.

First, after visiting Lang multiple times and getting close to him, Lang entrusts you with a letter to his son in the capital. → Deliver

the letter to Lang's son. → The son then asks you for a favor, and you complete it. → Obtain a reply to the letter from the son, and deliver it to Lang.

Or so the story goes, and eventually at the very end, after receiving his son's letter,

"It seems that there were some weapons in my old man's collection. I have no need for them so feel free to take one."

is what you're told, and from within those weapons, finally you could get a hold of Shiranui.

This was far beyond just a slight inconvenience.

Still, even without the strongest weapon in its level class – Shiranui – as a reward, this quest was worth doing. That's because, surprisingly, for being one of Nekomimineko's quests, this had a good story.

The consideration and a faintly visible love that the socially awkward Lang held towards his son who left for the capital, and the guilt and conflict said son felt towards his father for having left for the capital. Seeing the two's passing feelings resolved through the letters I delivered was so satisfying, and at the same time so touching that before I realized it the corners of my eyes became wet. It was a magnificent quest that, after clearing it, I genuinely was glad that I chose to do this quest.

At the same time, if you asked me whether I would like to do it another time, I would put my foot down and say no.

To begin with, even becoming close to Lang was exceedingly tough. To get close enough to be entrusted the letter requires listening to Lang's stories a minimum of five times, but that was very difficult to do. If I recall, during the game I had to visit this house just over ten times.

It isn't that Lang has a difficult temperament, he's just quite reclusive, so if you don't follow up properly then the conversation just fizzles out. When that happens, the event stops there.

When he says "please come again", he's actually driving you away, and the next day you end up having to listen to the same story again. While playing the game I thought this person was messing with me by repeating the same things, but I wonder if it's still the same in this world.

I did want to give it a small test, but at the very least I had no intentions of actually going through with it. My top priority right now was obtaining Shiranui. Right now what I should be thinking about above anything would be how to get Shiranui into my hands.

"Still, what do I do…"

I paced around in front of Lang's house.

Honestly, this was a highly difficult mission for me.

Due to my lifestyle playing games all day as a shut-in in university, my current communication skills should have deteriorated significantly. Even if that was not the case,

honestly, I was bad at negotiating. I wondered if I could properly talk with Lang.

“Come on!”

Stop worrying. Didn’t you even manage to get Melipe’s treasures?

This time too, everything will be fine.

“…deep breaths.”

I took some deep breaths.

As with anything, the first steps are key. If I make a good first impression, then I should be able to get Shiranui in one push!

Preparing myself, I knocked cheerfully on the door of Lang’s house.

“Excuse me! I heard that there was a famous blade here, would you sell it to me?”

And then, a few minutes later.

In front of me was a certain sword.

<Shiranui [Sword, Greatsword] Attack: 91 Weight: 8 Affinity: None Special: None>

The weapon of my dreams, Shiranui—I have it!

Truly, money is power!!

Part 4.

Having smoothly obtained Shiranui, I was walking around in an ecstatic mood swinging it around when suddenly an important thought hit me, and I stopped.

“Wait a second, how exactly do I equip this thing?”

Since arriving in this world, I had been unable to open the menu. That not only applied to the system menu which contained the calling functionalities and the current time, but also to game menus like the status menu and save/load menus.

In Nekomimineko, equipment was managed in an equipment menu, and it was from that menu where one could change the equipment of their character.

Due to that, it was impossible to forcibly remove another person’s equipment, and while holding a weapon that’s not equipped, it was not possible to use the weapon’s skills, and even if you hit something with it the effects from the weapon did not apply so there was not much point in it.

This was because, for some reason or another, this game’s NPCs were set to even include their private parts.

If it was possible to forcibly remove equipment, then undoubtedly there will be some perverted person who would think of trying to strip female NPCs, but this game was supposed to be rated PG so it would be a problem if that was possible…

Oh, and, even for your own character, if you have nothing equipped then it was set to show you in your underwear, so it was not possible to become fully naked.

In this case, does that mean even if I managed to obtain Shiranui, I couldn't actually use it to its full potential…?

"…But wait a moment. Does that mean this ring also has no effect?"

I had intended to equip it by wearing it on my finger, but as long as the game's rules were being followed, this shouldn't count as actually having it equipped.

"But then again, the ring is only supposed to change size to fit your finger when you equip it. So does that mean I was able to properly equip it?"

I suddenly felt very confused.

"Guess I'll give it a quick test."

Walking through random back alleys, I searched for a secluded, yet decently spacious location.

"…This looks good."

In the space between the houses, there was an area big enough that one could easily play catch.

At the far edge of the space, there was a bunch of flowers growing in an area sectioned off with rocks, and the words

“flower garden” written with shaky letters brought a faint smile to my face.

(I should be careful not to step on those flowers.)

Thinking that, I readied my sword – not Shiranui, but rather the beginner weapon Rusty Longsword. Then…

(Step!)

I won’t make the same mistake twice. If I were to say the skill’s name out loud, then it would be hard to make excuses if I get seen comboing skills. That’s why I merely ordered skills in my mind.

“!!”

A sudden acceleration from rest.

During that brief yet deeply familiar feeling of surpassing the laws of physics, I clenched my teeth.

Then, at the split second when my two feet touched ground,

(Slash!)

Not missing the timing, I activated Slash. Pondering for a bit, I decided to wait for the swing,

(Step!)

and once again, activated Step.

Of course, I succeeded.

During the previous battle, I didn't have the leisure to do so, but right now I was at least able to check on the condition of my body. I can still go on.

(Slash!)

Again, I cancelled into Slash at the end of the skill.

Up to now was the combo that I used to defeat the female bandit. At that time, before I had worn the ring, I was completely out of breath and could not continue the chain, but…

(I can, still do this! Step!)

From there, I took another step.

The Slash cancelled into a Step.

My vision blurred.

"G-Guh!"

A slight pain hit my chest. This was the warning that my stamina was about to run out.

But even then, it wasn't as bad as the pain from last time.

Onwards!

(Slash!)

The pain in my chest was making it hard to focus, but the timing had already become something like a reflex.

Just like the tens of thousands of times I had practiced in the game, I cancelled Step, and followed up with a slash.

“…Haah!”

At last, I reached my limit.

As my sword swing finished and the after-cast stun ended, I exhaled a deep breath and collapsed onto the ground.

“Haa, haa…, huuu, haaaaa.”

Controlling my breathing with deep breaths, I reflected on the situation.

Without a doubt, the number of times I was able to chain skills had increased. As a skill’s mastery increases the amount of stamina it consumes would decrease, but this couldn’t be explained with just that.

(The ring’s effect is working!)

Now that I know this, it was obvious what the next thing to test was.

“Whoa.”

Almost stumbling, I got up. Taking out Shiranui from the bag, in its place I put the Rusty Longsword. Equipping Shiranui, I,

(Slash!)

Ordered a skill. When I did so, my body automatically moved, raising Shiranui, and–swung it downwards!

I thought I even heard a sharp sound of something slicing through the air.

As expected from a high level weapon. Even though it's the exact same skill, the power was incomparable.

"…the skill, worked."

I was able to use a skill while holding Shiranui. This meant that it was possible to equip a weapon even without the menu.

"Could it be, because menus couldn't be used due to the game world becoming reality, this was replaced with a more realistic method?"

It was just a sudden thought, but I felt like it wasn't such a bad hypothesis.

"Hmm, hmmmm."

At the same time, I felt something nagging at the back of my mind, but wasn't quite able to put my finger on it.

"Oh well, whatever."

I was honestly relieved that it was possible to freely change equipment. Now that my immediate concerns were addressed, and since this seemed like just the perfect place, I decided to try out a few more things.

"Guess I'll give that a try."

The act of skill cancelling was to cast a different skill while one skill was still active, but that didn't mean this could be done whenever. It was only during *cancel points*, which were preset timing windows that differed for each skill, where the new command would be accepted.

Especially in Nekomimineko, the difficulty of skill cancelling was said to be very high due to the overall strict timings, but there was actually more than that.

The vast majority of Nekomimineko's skills had two or more cancel points set, and cancelling at the first cancel point was called a *short cancel*, while cancelling at later cancel points was called a *long cancel*.

I had only used the simpler long cancel until now. If I was able to short cancel as well, in return for a higher difficulty there were lots of interesting things that could be done.

"…Alright."

I confirmed that there was plenty of space ahead of me free of obstacles.

The effect of long cancelling Step and Slash was essentially that the after-cast stun could be avoided, but when those two skills were short cancelled, a completely different effect occurs.

The skill Step sends you flying towards the indicated direction at a high speed, gradually slowing down while in the air, and then landing. The second cancel point was right when you touch ground, but the first cancel point was at the moment when you start decelerating from the maximum speed.

Therefore, short cancelling means that only half the total distance is covered, but as a result it was possible to cut out the slow moving second half.

On the other hand, Slash's short cancel was even more extreme.

The second cancel point of Slash was when the sword's swing finishes, but the first cancel point was surprisingly right after you start swinging the sword, before the attack is even performed!

You might think that this would make casting the skill pointless, but there was actually one way to exploit this.

Being able to almost instantly cancel the skill meant that it could be chained into the next skill almost instantly. In other words, by squeezing in a short cancelled Slash, the same skill could be used twice in quick succession!

Combining the short cancels of Step and Slash, it was possible to move at phenomenal speeds.

It was at a level where right after a video using this appeared on the internet, most of the people who saw it immediately muttered "Wow, another bug…"

However, when it was proved not to be a bug but rather a proper technique, words of surprise and admiration filled the comments.

After that, the players who watched the videos all tried to learn those movements.

But, like I mentioned before, the difficulty of short cancel was high, even more so when, right after cancelling from Step into Slash, one has to almost immediately cancel from Slash back to

Step. Miss the timing by even a fraction of a second and the skill would not activate.

Many players gave up trying to learn the strict timings, labelling this short cancelling of Step and Slash as an advanced technique of Nekomimineko.

Putting together the super rapid chaining of cancels with the remarkably high movement speed when successfully executed, this technique became known as the *rapid cancel dash*.

Through a long, long time spent practicing (AKA playing the game all day), I was able to make this rapid cancel dash my own.

It was the fastest method of moving in the early game, and as an added benefit it was possible to chain into another skill at any time. If this technique could be used even in this world, then it would probably be of great use to me going forward.

(I haven't been using it much recently after learning other convenient skills, but my body should still remember the timing!)

It was a combo that boasted having one of the highest difficulties, but I trusted that I would be able to pull this off.

Now was the time to show off what I've gained from spending my bland university life on Nekomimineko!

"…All set."

I confirmed that my stamina had completely recovered.

Readying my sword… I took off!

(Step!)

The feeling of speed enveloped my body, but there was no time to immerse in that.

One after another, I quickly alternated between the orders.

(SlashStep… SlashStep… Slash!!)

My body moved forward with an exceptional speed, as I let just the final Slash continue through without cancelling…

–Whoosh!

I heard the wind rushing past my ears.

Next I knew, I was stopped on the opposite side of the open space with my sword at full swing.

(…I did it!)

Overwhelmed with excitement, not even caring about my ragged breathing, I tightly clenched my fist, and… noticed.

"…ah."

On one of the small paths in the gap between two houses, there was a small figure watching me with a dumbfounded expression.

It was a young girl, probably from one of the nearby houses.

From the watering can she held in her hand, she was probably the owner of the small flower garden.

(Oh crap…!)

The blood drained from my face.

Could she have seen what I was doing?

At the pinnacle of skill cancelling, the speed of the rapid cancel dash was leagues ahead of that of any normal skill. Even if it was a child who saw me, or rather, because it was a child with no preconceptions that saw me, it was possible that my secrets could be discovered.

There would be a big problem if a rumor started to spread in the town. Should I silence her? But wait, she's just a kid, so maybe I should just come up with some fitting excuse…

However, before my jumbled thoughts could reach a decision, the girl opened her mouth.

"Mister, your movements are like, kinda gross."

"…Eh?"

Giggling to herself, the girl walked away, leaving me frozen in place.

I watched her leave with a blank expression on my face. It wasn't until quite a while after she vanished from sight that I managed to mutter a sore reply.

"W-What do you mean, gross. I hope you're properly watering those flowers…"

–Thus, Souma Sagara faced his first defeat after arriving in the game world.

Part 5.

“Yah!”

With a light shout, I swung Shiranui towards the monster in front of me, the famous yet weakest monster in Nekomimineko, the Zlime.

As expected of a mid game weapon. Shiranui sliced through the Zlime as if it was butter, rendering it incapable of combat.

But, during that time another Zlime approached me from the side.

“Dah!”

I intercepted the jumping Zlime with Shiranui, and its body split perfectly in two while in the air.

However,

“Uu!”

Even when split in two, the Zlime’s tackle did not stop. It hit me, causing me to stagger slightly.

Losing its momentum, the pieces of the Zlime fell to the ground. Confirming that they were starting to disappear, I finally lowered Shiranui.

“I was a bit careless at the end.”

In Nekomimineko, when a monster starts their attack, even if you defeat it and reduce its HP to 0, it will still continue the attack. This was a strange feature of Nekomimineko, and at the same time something that anyone playing this game needs to always keep in mind.

I had intended to be calm, but it seemed that without realizing it I may have become rather tense.

(…Still, it didn't hurt at all.)

Looks like the armor that I generously bought was doing its job. I took no damage from the Zlime's tackle.

By the way, though I defeated two enemies just now, there were no item drops. By dealing the killing blow to a weak point known as the *critical point* one could double the drop rate, but I had no need to go for any of Zlime's drops, so I didn't really bother.

"Next, let's fight something a bit stronger."

Nodding to myself, I headed off towards a different field.

After having my spirit completely broken by that young girl, I decided to head out into the fields to recover my lost confidence.

Dashing into the equipment store, I bought a set of mithril light armor, the strongest armor sold in Ramlich's shops.

Finally after lots of things happening, like having the store clerk stare at me with a weird look when I said I wanted to buy mithril armor while wearing beginner's equipment, or like having the

clerk help me put on the armor I just bought because I had no idea how to put on armor, or like making small adjustments such as stuffing paper in the cracks between the armor to improve my survival chances, or like striking a cool pose in front of the mirror after I was done changing, I was able to finish my shopping trip without any major problems.

With this equipment there wasn't much of a chance of dying around here, and wanting to try it out as soon as possible, I ran straight towards the fields without bothering to get accessories or recovery items or such.

In the northern plains near the town I fought with the weakest monster in Nekomimineko, the Zlime, and its relative, the She-Zlime, but they were way too weak.

One strike with Shiranui and the enemy was defeated, and though store-bought, mithril armor was a high-class item for the early game and absorbed the Zlime's attacks like it was nothing.

Attack and it was a one-hit KO, be attacked and take no damage. This was as one-sided as it could get.

As a result, though I learned that even in this world I was able to slay monsters without feeling conscientious, I would not able to learn just how well I would be able to act during times when it matters from only fighting monsters that pose absolutely no threat.

I should probably head towards an area with slightly stronger monsters and try fighting for real. Right now I was in the

weakest area in the game, the field north of Ramlich called the Beginner's Plains, where enemies around level 3 appeared. West of here, there was the Forest of Beginnings where level 5-6 monsters appeared, but from the looks of this even that wouldn't be much of a challenge.

I crossed through town, heading towards the Plateau of Sealing south of the town where level 25 enemies appeared.

Right now, my level and weapon mastery were both low, but the quality of my equipment was high. Going by my senses, I would say that my attacks were as strong as a level 40 even without using skills, and my defense should be around the same as that of an adventurer around level 20. Level 25 monsters were by no means out of my league.

That said, it wouldn't be funny if I was too careless and got killed. I decided to try to only fight mobs that seemed easy to defeat but…

"Dang, I already got spotted!"

Just after leaving town, my eyes met with those of a group of 2 monsters. They wore a red hat on their head – the demi-human monster Redcap.

Redcaps are a member of the Goblin family, but compared with the level 5 Goblins, they are much more combative, and their level was also much higher. If I remember… they were level 24.

(I'm sorry that you had to be the first targets.)

I had hesitated slightly, but determined that it was still reasonable if it's just two of them, and decided to fight.

It would be disadvantageous to have to fight both of them at the same time. Before they could rush over to me, I set my sights on the Redcap on the right and activated Step. Long cancelling that Step, I linked it with a short cancel Slash into another Step.

"…Gi?"

Finally the Redcap reacted, but it was too late.

At that moment, the Redcap was already within Slash range.

"Take this!"

Together with my shout, Slash activated.

The Redcap wasn't even given time to scream as Shiranui effortlessly sliced its body in two.

"-Ugh!"

From the back of my throat a sound that I was unable to stifle leaked out.

In the end I felt a slight reluctance in killing a humanoid being. The only saving grace was that the feeling of slicing an enemy was closer to that from a game than from reality.

Still, this was no time to be calmly reflecting on myself. Before the other Redcap could strike, I once again Step-cancelled towards the right. Hiding behind the defeated Redcap, I waited for the after-cast stun to pass.

When the after-cast stun ended and I was able to freely move again, the first Redcap's body just happened to disappear, leaving me and the other Redcap face-to-face.

(Next, let's try to fight without using skills.)

I now knew that using skills I was able to gain the initiative and even defeat them with one hit. In that case, with that as safety, might as well take this time to test my own limits.

"Gigiii!"

Together with a screeching noise the Redcap's knife approached, and I evaded by backing off, purposely not using any skills. I felt a tiny shiver when the violently swung knife passed by, but I successfully dodged it.

Even the vertical slash and the jumping strike that followed were avoided without the use of skills.

(I can do this!)

Though I felt a slight nervousness and fear since everything seemed more realistic than the game, I was able to move as I had while in game. Attacks with this kind of speed were well within what I could react to, and more than anything the attack patterns were exceedingly simple.

(It would seem that Goblins' Two Moves is still true here!!)

How surprisingly, in Nekomimineko the Goblin-type monsters were only set with two types of attack patterns, either to

approach and swing their weapon vertically, or to leap at the target.

I had been slightly worried because the female bandit NPC had behaved differently from within the game, but it would appear that the movement patterns for monsters at least were the same. This was likely to be a very important piece of information for the future.

It wasn't just Goblins in particular. In the first place, monsters in Nekomimineko essentially had a pretty limited set of motions.

Compared to the human motions and AIs and such that were throughout VR apps and were easy to obtain in a standard package and customize, motions and AIs for monsters that only appeared in fantasy games were usually created from scratch in order to fit each game individually.

Lacking completely in the techniques and know-how of VR game development, Nekomimineko's monsters were quite a mess, but right now I was rather thankful for that.

"Now!"

Seeing the Redcap enter its jumping motion, I lept to the side, and while dodging its attack I struck its defenseless head with Shiranui.

Clean hit!

Even then, I backed away, keeping in mind what happened with the Zlime earlier, but the Redcap did not attempt to strike me back and merely vanished, as if melting into the air.

Finally, the only thing left in the place where the Redcap had been was its trademark red hat.

My first drop item. It was a scrap item that Redcaps drop with a low rate which could be sold for money. As expected, stuff like this seemed to function like in the game.

Furthermore, from defeating a tough enemy, I could feel power swelling up inside my body.

Level up.

“It seems like I should be able to just treat this like the game.”

Picking up the red hat from the ground, my eyes searched for the next prey.

For the next while, I stuck around the Plateau of Sealing, confirming that I was able to fight with no problems in this field.

That said, in this world when hit by an attack I would actually feel pain, and if I took too much damage and my HP fell to 0 then there was a chance that I would actually die for real. I can’t be too complacent.

What taught me that was a dog shaped monster called a Mad Hound. Taking a hit due to its high agility, I was surprised by the heavy impact and pain that I felt. Still, it was only at the level of a momentary wince, and didn’t affect my ability to continue the

battle, but if I was to treat this the same as the game where taking a burst of near-fatal damage felt no more than a slight numbness, then I would be in for a world of pain.

It's been awhile since then, and with becoming accustomed to fighting in this world, I had also gained quite a few levels. Even the battle senses that I had developed in the game were slowly coming back to me, and I was able to determine that in addition to Slash, I could also properly use another basic skill, Sideswipe.

However, the biggest part of my current strength would probably have to be attributed to this weapon I had.

"Ahhh, Shiranui is the best."

Its attack power was obviously great, but more than anything the fact that I was used to it was huge. In the game, I had mainly been using sword type weapons, so being of the same length Shiranui felt very natural to use.

Weapons were each categorized into stuff like swords, spears, etc., and based on those the weapon's length was established. The main reason for this was because, in a Nekomimineko-like fashion, the effect range of skills were set at fixed values and were completely unrelated from the actual reach of the weapon.

It might not be immediately obvious what this means, but if you think about what would happen if you use the same skill with two similar weapons of different lengths, then the reasoning becomes clear.

For example, let's imagine that there was a really long sword and a really short sword.

Normally, the long sword would have a vastly superior reach compared to the short sword, but due to the shenanigans in Nekomimineko, when you use a skill, the effective range of the two swords become the same.

What that means is when using a skill, an enemy that the long sword appears to hit may end up taking no damage, and an enemy that the short sword appears to miss may end up taking damage. Such inconsistencies would end up happening. That's why it was decided that swords would all be this length, spears would all be this other length, and so on.

Now, on the other hand, many weapon classes had a corresponding advanced version of the class. For example, ninja sword for dagger, lance for spear, and katana for sword.

Each of the advanced weapon classes were also classified as their base class, so every ninja sword was also a dagger, and could use both ninja sword and dagger skills. Of course, that weapon's reach would also be set to the value for a dagger.

Thus, designated as a katana, Shiranui possessed the same reach as a sword, and allowed the use of sword skills.

"As long as I have this sword, I'm… whoa whoa whoa!?"

Trying to walk while immersed in my thoughts, I stumbled on a lump on the ground.

I involuntarily collapsed to my knees,

“U-wah…”

and found myself face to face with a glaring Demon God.

Fear shot up my spine.

“This is… a relief of the Demon God.”

The thing that I stumbled over was a sculpted relief of the Demon God, one that is frequently seen in the areas controlled by demons.

The reason why there were many monsters in the Kingdom of Licht, the stage for Nekomimineko, was said to be because the Demon God lay sealed nearby. The setting was that in order to revive the Demon God and obtain its powers, the Demon Lord set its sights on this country and sent many monsters to conquer it.

My joyful mood was instantly shattered.

The last boss of the game, Demon Lord Of The End, was level 250. The hidden boss, Demon God’s Fragment, apparently had a level of over 300.

Though it didn’t appear in the game, if this world was produced according to the game’s setting, it wouldn’t be strange if the main body of the Demon God existed somewhere in this world.

If something like that existed, would humans actually be able to defeat it?

To be overjoyed at defeating enemies that were merely level 25, I must appear to be quite laughable.

“I really need to carefully think about what I should do from now on.”

Standing up, I muttered.

In fact, it was something that I probably should have thought about much earlier. However, acting like I was absorbed in this game that had become reality, I continued to avoid thinking about it.

(Even though I already knew that this was not a time for celebrating.)

If this world was the world of a normal game, then there would be no problems.

I would slowly raise my level, slowly become stronger, defeat the enemies in a sort of a routine, and with those earnings lazily live out my life. Such an option would be available to me.

But, the world of Nekomimineko wouldn’t accept such a laid back playstyle and a safe and secure life.

A forced bad end when time runs out. Destruction of the town from the invasion of monsters. Collapse of the country due to the rampage of NPC wizards. Encroachment of the world by a special monster.

There were countless events where if left alone would lead to an unrecoverable situation, and the dangers of sudden death could be found everywhere.

However, to try to clear the game in the same way I did in the game was also dangerous.

The reason I had been able to clear the game was because of the save, load, and reset functionalities and the sense of security in knowing that there was no big problem even if I mess up. In this world that felt no different from reality, it was not realistic to try to clear the game.

More importantly, even if I somehow managed to defeat the Demon Lord, there was a high chance that nothing would be resolved.

Nekomimineko was a game that focused strongly on side challenges. Though defeating the Demon Lord technically counts as clearing the game, that by no means marked the end of the game. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that this game did not contain a definitive ending.

I vividly remembered it. After defeating the Demon Lord and sitting through the unskippable credits roll that lasted over five minutes, I was suddenly brought, not to the scene of a special ending event, nor to the title screen, but rather straight back to where I was. Returning back to town, there were a few follow-up events, but from then on the topic transitioned naturally towards the hidden dungeon. Even at the hidden dungeon,

however, there weren't really any new events even though I had cleared the game.

To summarize, defeating the Demon Lord and clearing the game does not assure that this world would become any safer, and the likelihood of that being a trigger for sending me back to my old world was also low.

What's more, even if I worked hard and defeated both the last boss, the Demon Lord, and also the hidden boss, the Demon God's Fragment, who's to say that the real Demon God wouldn't be lurking somewhere in the shadows? I don't think for one second that I would be able to defeat such an enemy that I hadn't even seen in the game.

"I really need to find some way to get back."

I loved games, but that didn't mean I wanted to live in a game world. Being able to use skills and magic was very exciting, and fighting monsters was a very exhilarating experience. But, if you asked me whether I would want to live in such a world to the extent of risking my life, my answer would be absolutely not.

The many different ways I had died in the game flashed through my mind. There had been times where I had been literally smashed to a pulp by monsters, there had been times where I had been swallowed whole by a slime, and there had also been times where I had been slowly tortured to death after being paralyzed or petrified by a trap.

I didn't mind this so much in the game. Most of the pain would have been blocked out, and all that it meant was that I would have to try again starting from a save point. But, if I was to meet such a fate in this world…

A shiver ran through my body. The hand that was holding Shiranui trembled.

"This isn't a joke. I should get out of this wretched place as soon as possible."

Luckily, I had thought of one single method with which there was a possibility that I could get back to my original world.

It was not a guarantee, but rather a risky measure that could kill me in the worst case. Even then, it would give me a higher chance of survival compared to staying in this world forever.

"But to do that, I can't spend my time lazing around here!"

In order to attempt that solution, I need more power.

Either to become more powerful myself, or to obtain powerful allies.

Neither of which could be accomplished if I holed myself up in this town.

"So, I should… huh?"

Just as I was about to reach an answer, I noticed an anomaly.

"What the? Dust?"

A dust tornado? Did such a phenomenon even exist in this world? While thinking that, an even more disastrous possibility came to mind.

“Wait, wait a moment. Just how long have I been grinding here?”

I asked myself, but no answer came. The menu that would have provided me with the time before was now no longer existent.

But, if the true identity of that dust storm was what I thought it was, then this was extremely bad.

I hurriedly tried to leave the place, but,

“Pl… ea…! …elp… …me…!”

When I heard that faint voice, carried by the wind, I realized that it was all too late.

She’s coming.

The one and only character to hold the impressive achievement of dominating both the most popular NPC rankings and the least popular NPC rankings.

Her overwhelming presence brought her the affection of many players, as well as the resentment of an even larger number of players. She was…

“Train Girl is coming…!!”

Extra.

Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki ››› “Nekomimineko Glossary”

Lizardmen’s Trap (Event)

Called The First-Timer Killer, this is an event that kills many beginners.
It is a tough event where, even if you know the trick, the combat difficulty is still high, but it is actually possible to avoid just by not approaching the wagon. In that case the lizardmen would obviously be wiped out, but if you are having trouble clearing it then give this a try.

Bloody Stab (Skill)

Dark element dagger skill. Famous suicide skill.
For some reason this skill’s effect range always overlaps with your character’s hitbox, so players with high attack power will instantly die upon using this skill. Still, skills that can target self are valuable, so there are people that make use of this.

Shiranui (Weapon)

One of the main primary weapons in the mid game.
Sword users especially have said that the difficulty of the game depends heavily on how early this weapon is obtained.
However, past level 100 this weapon no longer dominates, so when that time comes either look for a different weapon or try to upgrade it.

Old Tuto (Character)

The famous old man that everyone knows. Very caring, but he

talks for a long time.
If you try to hurry him up, he goes off on a long tangent about how youngsters nowadays have no patience, so no matter what do not try to interrupt him. It is believed that being able to endure his long talk is actually part of the tutorial.

Chapter 2 – You Can't Run From Train Girl.

Part 1.

Once, I had encountered a person who seemed to hold a burning hatred for the leveling system inside RPGs.

"Hey, this might be a tactless question, but is there actually any fun in easily beating all the bosses after grinding lots of levels? Doesn't the joy of a game come from honing your fighting style and optimizing your equipment to finally snatch victory from your struggles? Why would you spend hours upon hours repetitively doing something that's like manual labor, just to make the game more boring? I'm not trying to bash you, but I just honestly can't understand it."

Shut up, I like feeling super strong, so if you're gonna say something like that then why don't you go play a game without levels, was what I had almost said, but then I once again discovered a group of people who had thought that way.

–They were the producers of Nekomimineko.

So then why did you guys purposely create a level-based RPG! I'm not trying to bash you, but I just honestly can't understand it!!

…Back on topic. In some fantasy simulation games (SLGs) or strategy role playing games (SRPGs), if you dawdle in the same place for too long trying to grind, then some strong force that obviously can't be beat playing normally comes out and starts to massacre your team.

It was meant to be some sort of message from the producers that you shouldn't be hanging around here and to hurry up and move onwards.

However, in contrast to SLGs or SRPGs, the genre of RPGs was mostly balanced around leveling up, and some even accept the act of grinding as a form of enjoyment, so such an opponent that was meant to hurry up the player wouldn't normally appear.

But, Nekomimineko was an exception.

Decreeing mindlessly farming levels to be an unhealthy act, the reaper is sure to visit each player who tries to grind in the early game.

To be precise, if one tries to grind in the maps around Ramlich for an extended amount of time, then she will show up.

Following Lizardmen's Trap, the second assassin of Nekomimineko: Train Girl!

Hearing Train Girl's name, perceptive individuals as well people with long experience playing MMORPGs should immediately catch on. "Ah, MPK, huh."

MPK stands for Monster Player Kill, or alternatively Monster Player Killer. It refers to the act of killing another player by dumping a large number of monsters onto them, or to a person who commits such an act, respectively. This is called a train because of the large number of mobs that are being dragged around. Indeed, Train Girl was what the NPC in Nekomimineko who performs MPK was called.

Learning about this, most players had the following thoughts.

MPK sure sounds dangerous. I'm glad I learned about this in advance. But if I make sure to only fight near the town and quickly run away when someone like that shows up, then I should be fine.

However, this train of thought was naïve. To be blunt, it was way too naïve.

There was no way such a half-hearted way of thinking would be able to match the ill will of the Nekomimineko development staff.

Towards such laid-back people, there was a saying amongst the players who had actually seen Train Girl.

…You can't run from Train Girl!!

The dust gradually drew closer, and the outlines of a large group of monsters chasing a single girl became clear.

“Pleeaseeee, heeelppp meeeeeeeeeeee!!”

As the girl’s cry grew louder, I let out a huge sigh.

Train Girl’s event was said to be even worse than Lizardmen’s Trap, but the worst part about it was that the central character to the event did not have any bad intentions.

When running away from monsters, Train Girl seems to possess cheat-level stats for speed and stamina as well as an evasive technique that makes one wonder whether she has eyes on the back of her head. She can escape from any enemy, and rarely is she caught and killed, with the few witness reports being linked to bugs.

Seeing this, one would think that she would be just fine even without any help.

However, the moment she meets someone who seems like they might help her, namely, a player, she loses that exceptional ability to escape.

It seemed that her ability was set as something like an adrenaline rush, so the relief from seeing someone causes all the strength to drain from her body making her unable to adequately move.

In other words, this meant that if a player was to abandon her and run away, then she would undoubtedly be killed by the monsters.

If she had been a character with evil intentions and purposely lured monsters to try to MPK the player, it would probably be easy to just leave her behind.

But, Train Girl herself was not even aware herself that she was an MPK. What's more, if players just didn't exist to begin with, then she would have just been a normal girl and wouldn't be causing anything like a MPK.

She was just a beginner adventurer who was trying her best to become a skilled adventurer, who just *happened* to be surrounded by a large number of monsters and forced to run whenever a player tried to grind levels in a field for an extended period of time. That's right, she was a victim.

In fact, if one was to overcome this MPK event several times, she would even start worrying that if she was going to cause this much trouble for the player, then maybe she should just give up being an adventurer. She was such a kindhearted person.

What's more, she would never agree to leave the player behind. Even if you beg her to escape first, or to go to the town and call for help, she would insist, "I can't possibly leave you here and run away by myself!" and stubbornly refuse to move.

Thus, there were only two possibilities left available to the player.

Either leave Train Girl behind and run away in remorse, or prepare for a tough battle and try to fight while protecting Train Girl. Those were the only two choices.

In the case of the former, it is difficult if not impossible to make it out unscathed.

Though many of the monsters that Train Girl brings are quite fast, as long as one does not attack them they will only target Train Girl. However, only when the target was Train Girl, the monsters would not immediately kill her, but rather were programmed to slowly torture her to death.

It's not that easy to be able to ignore Train Girl's sobbing voice crying for help, or that voice slowly growing weaker, or the final words that she whispers before dying, "I'm sorry, Mom…"

Of course, for any normal human, this was nothing more than a harsh reparation, so most people would immediately mash the reset button multiple times, or otherwise pay for being alive with a large blow to their conscience.

The cause of the saying, "you can't run from Train Girl" stems from this.

Then, what if one was to choose to stand and fight?

Not only did the player need to defeat the numerous enemies that Train Girl brought, they had to do it while burdened with the giant hindrance that was Train Girl.

Even if they were weak monsters from the field the player was grinding in, there was close to no chance of winning when fighting a large number of them at the same time. Yet, after meeting up with the player Train Girl becomes basically unable

to move, so the player has to continuously watch out for her while fighting the monsters.

Just having to watch out for her while fighting was already harder than fighting solo normally.

On the other hand, trying to fight as if one was solo would just result in the defenseless Train Girl quickly being killed. It was not an uncommon development that, shocked at this occurrence, an attack would slip through the player's guard and the player would end up being killed too.

Another common pattern was paying too much attention to Train Girl.

Focusing too much on protecting her, the player fails to fight at their full potential, and gets killed before Train Girl does. But in that situation, the player could die with a refreshing feeling of "even though I died, I was fighting to protect a girl, so I have no regrets" – was the kind of satisfying development that would never occur in this game.

As for why… it's because Train Girl would never leave the player behind.

Between the time when the player's HP hits 0 and when the game over screen appears, there was a slight time lag. During that time, the player had to look on whether they wanted to or not.

"Hang in there! Please hang in there! How could this, all because of me…"

The sight of a tearful Train Girl embracing the player and saying this,

“Gyaah!”

and the moment a blade is swung towards the now stationary Train Girl’s head.

–Honestly, it was quite traumatic.

In the end, the players that had experienced this event agreed that Train Girl was to be avoided, and with that in mind controlled the amount of grinding they did, progressing naturally through the game while frequently changing their hunting grounds.

But, having not gone near beginners’ fields in the game recently, I had completely forgotten about Train Girl.

“…Now then, what should I do?”

Train Girl was steadily approaching. I didn’t know how her speed compared to the rapid cancel dash, but it was probably faster than the speed I could run at.

Following her, there were…

“Mad Hounds, huh.”

There were more than ten Mad Hounds. The other mobs had probably been shaken off due to the difference in speed. Still, Mad Hounds were the most troublesome enemies in this field, so the fact that there were no other monsters wasn’t really much consolation.

(Should I run away?)

My location wasn't that far from the gates of the town. If I were to sacrifice her, I would definitely be able to safely escape.

This world was not a game.

It was not a world where failures could be resolved just by resetting. As an adventurer, she probably wouldn't blame me even if I abandon her here.

"Hmpf, as if."

I was the one who knew the best that I wasn't capable of something like that.

Fortunately, my stamina was full and my HP had hardly been touched. If it's just a few Mad Hounds, I might as well have some fun with them.

Feeling sweat start to form from my nervousness, I grasped Shiranui. At last, the sandstorm arrived.

Running at the forefront, while gasping for breath, Train Girl squeezed what remained of her strength and called out.

"Please! Help, me!"

Her voice sounded like it might cut out at any moment. Hearing that desperate beg for help, I…

"Leave it to me! Get behind me!"

replied with the most reassuring words I could come up with.

"T-Thank, you."

With an expression as if having found light at the end of a tunnel, Train Girl dashed behind me, and with that collapsed from exhaustion.

But, that was all I needed.

The Mad Hounds in pursuit had stopped, wary of me. With Train Girl and me in the center the ten or so Mad Hounds took up positions in a semicircular arc.

Mad Hounds were quite sly creatures.

Knowing the reach of a human's weapon, they keep at a set distance barely out of attack range, and, waiting for their comrades to circle behind the target, they all attack at the same time.

That's why, before the Mad Hounds had a chance to move, I launched my attack!

With Shiranui held ready on my left, I Stepped forward.

(I didn't expect to have to expose my secret techniques so early… but I'm counting on you, Shiranui!)

It was more or less around three meters to the farthest enemy.

This was the perfect position!

Not letting go of the chance, I short cancelled Step and, facing the Mad Hounds who had yet to be able to react, activated my next skill!

"Invisible Blade!!"

The moment I shouted the name, Shiranui unleashed an invisible strike.

The sword reached the hound on the far left, which was just about to jump on me,

“W-Watch ou… ehhh!?”

and easily sliced it in half. From behind, Train Girl’s surprised voice could be heard, but,

“I’m not done yet!”

that was not the end. The strike from Shiranui that had cut down the the first hound carried onto the one behind, beside, diagonally behind, two over… onto the enemies that seemed to be untouched by the body of the sword, and in the blink of an eye all of the hounds on the path of the strike had been sliced apart.

“…Phew.”

By the time my sword reached the end of its swing, the ten or so Mad Hounds had all been cut in two.

For now, this was all of the enemies that had chased her here, but if the slower monsters that had been shaken off during the chase managed to catch up then it would be quite troublesome.

Lending a shoulder to Train Girl who still couldn’t reliably walk on her own, we hurried away.

“…Also, that attack just then was amazing!”

After receiving plenty of words of apology and thanks, she followed up with those words.

Looking carefully, her eyes were sparkling.

“I’ve never seen a skill like that before! You must be really strong!”

“A-Ahahaha…”

She seemed to hold me in high regard. This was making me uncomfortable.

By the way, not counting the use of magic, it was quite difficult to learn an AOE weapon skill. In normal play, it would be around level 50 before you would finally learn one.

“I’m still only level 27. I want to quickly become a skilled adventurer…”

“I-I see.”

Trying to carry on the conversation with a dry smile, cold sweat dripped down my back.

I can’t tell her. I definitely won’t tell her.

That I was a beginner adventurer who may or may not have even made it to level 10,

“I’m trying hard but I’ve still only learned 4 weapons skills…”

or that the “Invisible Blade” back then was not really an AOE attack but rather a close range attack, and that it was actually a basic skill like Slash that anyone with a weapon could use.

“But but, I want to hurry up and get stronger, and become a great adventurer like you!!”

There’s no way I could tell her that it was just a simple Sideswipe!!

Part 2.

Let’s say that there were two weapons in front of you.

<Iron Sword [Sword] Attack: 40 Weight: 10 Affinity: None Special: None>

<Uchigatana [Sword, Katana] Attack: 36 Weight: 8 Affinity: None Special: None>

If used by the same character, which of these would be able to deal more damage?

Just by pure attack power, the former one, Iron Sword, would be the winner. However, the reality is that the latter one, Uchigatana, would end up dealing more damage most of the time.

This had to do with the adjustments given to different weapon types.

This might have been done in order to make the Weapon Fusion System work, but if two weapons are of the same level, then regardless of their type, they would end up with similar attack values. No matter how powerful a giant axe looks, or how weak a small dagger appears, from the numbers alone their attack power would not be much different.

Yet, if you were to actually try attacking, you would find that there is indeed a big difference. Even with the same attack power, the giant axe would end up dealing far more damage.

This was the weapon type bonus.

In the initial example, when compared to an Iron Sword which is categorized as a sword, the Uchigatana is further categorized as a katana, so due to the weapon type bonus its offensive power would end up higher.

Now then, hopefully, you should have a slight idea at what I'm trying to get at.

That's right, this is about how the skill I used was able to defeat more than ten Mad Hounds at once, and also why I was able to say with such confidence that Shiranui was without a doubt the strongest weapon in its level class.

This is about the technical details behind those statements.

Summarizing the main close range weapon types and their peculiarities, it becomes something like this:

[Bare fists] is as it sounds, using one's bare fists. Has many skills with knockback. Largely affected by the character's strength parameter, so at higher levels it is often stronger than using a weapon that one is unskilled with.

[Knuckles] are weapons that are wrapped around one's knuckles. It is possible to use [Bare fists] skills even with this weapon type

equipped. Has many multi-hit skills. Low weapon type bonus value.

[Dagger] is a short blade weapon. Has many tricky skills. Low weapon type bonus value.

[Ninja sword] is the advanced weapon class for dagger, and thus has the same length. It's a short sword that seems like it would be used by a ninja. Has many shadow skills like hiding and assassinate. Normal weapon type bonus value.

[Sword] is the basic weapon type. Has a good balance of skills. Normal weapon type bonus value.

[Katana] is the advanced weapon class for sword, and thus has the same length. Single-edged and thinner and lighter than a sword, but generally difficult to obtain. Has skills with higher offensive power than swords. High weapon type bonus value.

[Broadsword] is a giant sword with a size around that of a grown man. Has both high powered single target skills and defensive skills. Very high weapon type bonus value.

[Greatsword] is a monstrous weapon around three meters long, so even withdrawing it from its sheath is tough. Due to only appearing in the latter half of the storyline, greatswords are all rare or unique. Already very strong just by itself, when one uses a skill it becomes ridiculously powerful. Extremely high weapon type bonus value.

Normally, weapons are assigned a single type, but there are exceptions. Like the Uchigatana which is categorized both as a

sword and a katana, there are cases where a single weapon is treated as two separate types when the types are of the same length such as sword&katana, dagger&ninja sword, or spear&lance.

Hearing all this, have you already figured it out? Just in case, once again here's Shiranui's data for reference.

<Shiranui [Sword, Greatsword] Attack: 91 Weight: 8 Affinity: None Special: None>

Well, it's as you can see.

The katana Shiranui should have been categorized as [Sword, Katana], but someone seemed to have lost their mind and given it some ridiculous setting like [Sword, Greatsword]. It was a bugged item.

…Mm, well…

I know what you're thinking; the characters for katana (刀) and greatsword (大太刀) do indeed look somewhat similar. But still this isn't something that anyone would normally mess up.

So then, what exactly ends up happening because of that mistake?

First of all, due to the weapon type bonus its attack power becomes abnormally high. The bonus from katanas and from greatswords were in completely different classes.

Normally, greatswords were much more difficult to come by compared to katanas, and at the earliest it would be the latter

part of the midgame before you could finally obtain one. Furthermore, it was heavy due to how long it was, almost impossible to wield without using both hands, and difficult to use in tight places. Also, when hung from the waist it randomly catches on walls and quickly becomes annoying.

But, with Shiranui there were no such worries.

Shaped like a normal katana, it was easy to use, yet when attacking it outputted as much power as a greatsword.

It's really just the best.

On top of all that, since it was classified as a greatsword, it was able to use greatsword skills. However, in Nekomimineko, skills' ranges were not affected by the weapon's length.

Which means…

What do you know! When using a greatsword skill with Shiranui (even if it is the basic greatsword skill Sideswipe), a strange phenomenon will occur where even though it seems as though the swing doesn't even reach one meter, its attack range actually ends up being closer to the three meters of that of a greatsword.

This was the true form of Invisible Blade.

In essence, Shiranui came with the form and ease of use of a katana while having the power of a greatsword, and when needed could unleash an attack with the range of a greatsword. It was a cheat-level weapon.

That was why…

“Really, that was so amazing! You defeated all those Mad Hounds with just one blow!”

those gleaming eyes of Train Girl pierced deep into my chest.

After all, that attack was 100% due to the power of the weapon, and if Train Girl had known about that, then she would probably be able to do the exact same.

That said, I couldn’t really explain to her that, “Oh, this was actually exploiting a configuration bug on an item…” It’s quite tormenting.

“Ah, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Ina Traille. I’m an adventurer, though still a beginner, and my favorite weapon is the dagger.”

To be honest I hadn’t bothered to remember what her real name was, but I felt like it had been something like that. I quietly nodded to myself, as Train Girl stared straight at me.

“Uhh, is something the matter?”

Perplexed, I asked her, and she timidly replied with upturned eyes.

“U-Uhm, your name… Would you mind telling me, your name?”

Ah, I see. That was what her stare just now was looking for.

(Still, what should I do…)

From my vague memories, I remember that based on how the conversation after saving Train Girl went, it was possible to

trigger an event for her to join as a companion. Of course, even with such an event, without the player's invitation she wouldn't end up following along, but that was all when this was a game.

In the current situation where she was a proper *human*, there was no reason why she would join or stay according to my will.

I had largely played through Nekomimineko solo, or in other words travelling by myself, unless the circumstances required it. If this was still a normal game, then at this point I would do as I always did, and journey ahead solo.

However, while this was a game, this was not a game.

As long as it is unclear what would happen if I died, it did not seem like a bad idea to cover all the bases and travel with a party of companions. Taking that and Train Girl's trustworthy personality into consideration, the choice to take her as my first party member didn't seem all that unreasonable.

Falling deep into thought, I had ended up completely ignoring Train Girl, when,

"U-Uhm… Is it, not okay?"

Facing those slightly teary eyes glittering with expectation, I was suddenly taken aback.

In the end, Train Girl was still a rather popular character in Nekomimineko, and well, she was fairly cute, so to speak.

To be blunt, taking into account things like the thickness of her chest armor or her short stature, she could by no standard be

considered to be well-endowed as a female. It's just, her brown-colored short hair that gently sways as she walks, as well as her big, round eyes that keep darting everywhere, make her seem like a curious small animal. When gazed at by those pure, glistening eyes, my slightly conscience-stricken self couldn't help but falter a bit.

Even now, she was looking up at me with an anxious face that seemed about to burst into tears at any moment. It would probably be impossible to turn away from such a look and return to town without even giving a name.

(That's the way it is, it can't be helped.)

I made an excuse to nobody in particular. While feeling slightly guilty, I made my decision, as if pushed on by her gaze.

Making as serious an expression as I could, I slowly confessed.

"Before that, there's something that I have to tell you. I'm not the amazing adventurer that you think I am."

"Eh, but…"

Reflexively, I stopped her from trying to reply with my hand.

(I know you're surprised. But, this is the truth.)

In order to convince the bewildered girl in front of me, I continued to speak.

"In the first place, strictly speaking I'm not even an adventurer. What defeated the monsters back there was purely the power of

my weapon, and until yesterday, I hadn't really even held a sword before."

"No way… b-but, in that case, what are you?"

As expected, this question came.

But, having anticipated such a question, I solemnly opened my mouth.

Only a single name came to mind.

That's why, posing to the best of my abilities, I introduced myself.

"I am Reinhart! The great merchant, Reinhart!!"

Part 3.

On the way back to the town, I continued to emphasize that I was actually a weapons merchant, and that what happened back then was all because of the power of a rare item that I was selling.

Thinking about it carefully, the whole thing was quite questionable, but she seemed to have been convinced. It would be problematic if I blabbed too much and gave myself away, so as we entered the town, I claimed to have something to do, and half-forcibly bid farewell to Train Girl.

"P-Please wait! Please let me…"

She yelled and tried to chase after me, but I quickly escaped with rapid cancel dash.

But man, Train Girl's really something. From her speed it would be hard to imagine that not long ago she had collapsed from exhaustion.

"…Did I manage to lose her?"

Holding my breath, I turned around, but there was nobody there.

I seemed to have successfully shaken her off. *Haaa*, I let out my breath. I'm glad I was able to get away.

It does bother me slightly that I wasn't able to properly end things with Train Girl, but by saying that I was a merchant that was only strong because of an item, she probably wouldn't try too hard to look for me.

Even if on some whim she decided to try to find me, the only information that would come up for Reinhart would be for a lizardman merchant that was obviously not me. I was planning to lie low for a while, so the lead would probably just stop there.

While comforted by that fact, at the same time my chest filled with guilt. For some reason her determined expression flashed through my mind.

To say that she had wanted to become my companion might be slightly conceited, but based on her behavior, without a doubt she at least wanted to talk with me a bit more.

"Y'know, making a party after all this time would be a bit… yeah."

It wasn't like I had no reservations at all. It's just that my experiences with Nekomimineko caused me to choose to adventure solo.

I mean, party members end up in the way when you want to use a skill, and with a long range weapon like Shiranui I could fight multiple enemies perfectly well, and since monsters are all targeting me it was easier to predict their movements, and being able to monopolize all the experience meant I level up faster, and equipment and lodging for a single person would be much cheaper, and when running away there's nobody else to worry about so I can run away whenever I want, and there wouldn't be stupid NPC AI messing up my pace, and so all in all playing solo is amazing.

"…Also, well, I don't like seeing party members die."

I had a bit of a history with party members dying. Also, this world was now reality. There was no reset button to return everything to the way it was if someone died.

In order to return to my own world, I would probably need to do quite a few reckless things. If she ended up dying accompanying me on such adventures, I would not be able to forgive myself for it. I was going to go back to my own world soon anyways, so even if I made a party it would not be able to exist for very long. This was probably for the best, for her sake as well.

Like that, I rationalized to myself.

"…Ugh, what am I doing!"

Nothing was going to happen if I just sat here and sulked. That would just make my escape from Train Girl meaningless.

In order to accomplish my goals, I needed to quickly grow stronger.

And what I needed for that was actually buried just below my feet.

The hardest dungeon in the game, the Sealed Demon's Labyrinth, where enemies averaged level 250 and the strongest monster in the game, the Demon God's Fragment, lay sleeping. This underground maze lies below the Demon God's relief in the Plateau of Sealing to the south of Ramlich.

Normally, to enter this hidden dungeon you need to use an item that the last boss drops when you defeat him, but this world was no longer a game.

I had already learned from the thief Melipe what I should do when there is something I wanted.

"My weapon is… still fine."

Besides monsters and characters, weapons and armor as well as some items that could be used as tools also have a level and HP setting. As things like weapons and tools are used, they wear out, and when their HP reaches 0 they are destroyed.

In addition, lighting items like lamps and torches, as well as items with continuous effects like barriers and such lose HP

while they are active, and as expected when their HP reaches 0 they are destroyed.

On the other hand, there were also quests that made use of this. For example, there was an operation to obstruct the enemy's advances by destroying a suspension bridge… Though in the end due to the bridge's HP being absurdly high it was only possible to complete the quest by wiping out the enemy first and then slowly chipping away at the bridge, but that was all standard Nekomimineko quality.

If one plans to continuously use the same weapon, then they must periodically visit a blacksmith, but it does not seem like I needed to do so today. For the time being, I was feeling hungry, so I headed back to town for lunch.

I ate at the inn. Of course, I had to pay for it, so while I was at it I paid for tonight's room as well. On second thought, I took a chance and asked the inn owner whether he had any tools for digging holes that he could lend, and ended up borrowing quite a sturdy shovel.

This was an unexpected stroke of luck. I quickly finished up my meal and immediately headed out of town.

As I reached the gate, the guards looked towards the large shovel with surprise, but I ignored them and set off towards the Plateau of Sealing.

While randomly dispatching the monsters that approached, I proceeded to the location of the Demon God's relief that I found earlier on. There were times where a decent number of enemies came at the same time, but I took care not to use Sideswipe. I was probably worrying too much, but it was a trick that I didn't want people to see, and it would also be a problem if I came to rely completely on it.

"…It should be around here."

Fortunately, I quickly arrived at the location of the relief. It wasn't all that far from the town, and I've visited the hidden dungeon many times before, so there was no way I would miss it.

However, from this point on it was uncharted territory.

"Maybe, around here?"

Calculating an approximate location, I tried digging at a place slightly behind the relief.

This relief was made such that if you touched a specific item to it it would start to move and reveal an underground passage, and if I remembered correctly, this passage extended towards the head of the relief of the Demon God. If I dug around there, then I should hit the underground passageway before too long.

"The ground seems… not too hard."

In the game the ground was something that was indestructible, but in this world it seemed there was no problem digging the dirt up. Even if low leveled, my character in this game world has

vastly more strength and stamina than my self in the real world. The hole probably wasn't going to be all that deep anyways, so it shouldn't take much time to dig this hole.

"Well then, let's get digging!"

Setting the mood, I swung my shovel towards the ground.

"That's strange…"

About a meter deep, the dirt suddenly became tougher, and it became near impossible for the shovel's blade to eat into the earth.

"I'm probably almost there too…"

It felt like I was only a single step away. However, that step was long.

(Could it be, some kind of level adjustment?)

At least in the game, regular walls and such couldn't be damaged at all, so they did not have HP or level settings, but in this world it was possible to freely tamper with them.

That meant there was the possibility that walls in high level areas are harder than walls in low level areas.

If that was the case, then this was even more proof that I was close to reaching my goal.

"If I take too long, Train Girl is going to get called over again…"

Train Girl's Train Event was not something that only happens once. As long as one lingers in the fields around Ramlich, she will bring monsters to you over and over again.

So I've got to break through this with full force.

"How do you like… this!!"

I raised the shovel as high as I could, and slammed it into the ground.

My hand felt a promising response, but,

"…Ah."

The shovel snapped.

Well in that case… This time I pulled out Shiranui. It was obviously not shaped for digging holes, but in the least it was still a high level weapon. It wouldn't lose to a shovel in terms of sturdiness.

I raised Shiranui, and, aiming for the center of the hole,

"How about, this!"

I forcefully swung downwards.

With less resistance than expected, Shiranui sunk into the ground.

(Did I make it?)

Pulling out Shiranui and examining the place it stabbed into, there was a small black opening.

It seemed to be connected to the underground passage. That weird lack of resistance seemed to be because I had stabbed through to the other side.

“Haha! I knew you could do it, Shiranui!”

Even if it was in a high level area, in the end it’s just dirt. There’s no way it could stand up to an actual weapon like Shiranui.

With this what to do was clear. Throwing away the broken shovel, I continued to dig at the ground with Shiranui. After much effort, I succeeded in somehow enlarging the opening to a size where a single person could enter.

“I did it!”

I clenched my fist in triumph.

As I did so, as if celebrating my hard work, a gust of cold wind blew out from within.

Feeling something more than just coldness from the wind, my body involuntarily shook.

“Man, I wouldn’t expect any less from the place the Demon God’s Fragment sleeps. But, that’s just how I like it.”

Just as I was planning to jump through the opening to start looking around when that happened.

“–What are you doing, Reinhar… I mean, Souma?”

Hearing a voice clearly calling my real name, I turned around.

(Eh? No, way…?)

Seeing that figure, my eyes opened wide.

After all, facing me,

“That hole, and what you just said, the Demon God…? What exactly is going on, Souma?!”

With her knife at the ready, and looking at me with a suspicious gaze, was Train Girl.

“H-how…?”

Shaken up by the unexpected appearance of Train Girl, I looked up at her from the bottom of the hole seeking an answer, and was met with a straightforward reply.

“Souma, after parting with you, I visited the person named Reinhart.”

Summarizing her whole story, it becomes something like this.

After parting with me, she still felt that she wanted to properly thank me, so she immediately started searching for me, or rather for *a merchant named Reinhart*. From the perspective of a modern day person, it would seem as if this amount of information would not be nearly enough to easily find someone, but this was a town from a game. Perhaps due to the small population, it seemed she was able to immediately find him by utilizing a bit of footwork and asking around.

But of course, who she found was a lizardman merchant named Reinhart, and not me. Based on my prediction the trail should have stopped there…

When Train Girl described the characteristics of her savior to Reinhart, him being the perceptive person he was, Reinhart immediately saw through that it was me, and gave her the address of the inn I was staying at.

While walking skeptically towards the inn, she was then told by an eyewitness that the person she was looking for had just finished eating, and was heading off somewhere carrying a shovel.

At this point, if it was me, I would have waited at the inn for the person's return, but this was Train Girl with her excellent footwork that we're talking about.

This time, she started asking around for an adventurer carrying a shovel. When she heard from the guards at the south gate that someone carrying a shovel had passed through, she had a sudden hunch and returned to the place where she first met me, and this was the result.

"Now it's my turn to ask you questions."

Tightening her grip on the knife, Train Girl said with a stern expression.

(…Uh oh.)

Right now, both of my legs were completely in the hole. Even if my character level was low, if I was in a normal situation then I had the confidence that I could somehow overcome this with the use of skills.

However, the skill Step was by design ineffective for moving vertically. Even though the hole's depth was only around one meter, that was enough to completely seal off any of my combos that used Step.

Of course, if I were to fight with Shiranui then I probably would not lose, but in return I would not be able to hold back, which would probably mean that I would end up hurting her.

If possible, I wanted to avoid that. I had to somehow resolve this using only words…

"Even I have heard the stories about this place. Deep below this Plateau of Sealing, a dreadful Demon God lies sealed."

As if checking, Train Girl said.

I said nothing in response.

"That relief, isn't it engraved with the figure of the Demon God? And just now, you clearly said something about the Demon God's Fragment sleeping there didn't you? A-are you…"

With tears in her eyes, she glared sharply at me.

"–Are you a Dark Cultist, wishing for the revival of the Demon God?"

Oh man… I facepalmed in my mind.

I mean, I don't blame her for thinking this way after seeing someone who tried to hide their identity digging hard at the place where the Demon God was sealed.

I even vaguely remember that in the game I seem to have had defeated some Dark Cultists who worshipped the Demon God. So I had been mistaken as one of those people, huh.

"Saving me from the monsters, and saying all of those strange things to confuse me, they were all to divert my attention from this place and from yourself. …Am I wrong?"

Yes, you're completely wrong! Saving you from the monsters was only because I couldn't stand seeing you slaughtered, and saying all of those strange things to confuse you was only because I didn't want to become involved with you!

Still, I can't believe that lie actually came back to bite me in this way!

Weird lies really are things that shouldn't be made.

"Even after realizing that I had been lied to, I still wanted to believe in you, Souma. However, I might have harbored suspicions about you ever since that."

"Since, what…?"

Nothing came to mind. But the answer was quickly provided.

“Yes. When you ran away from me in town… those freakish movements, if it’s not due to your devotion to an unholy cult, then how can you explain it?”

“Freakish, movements?”

Still, nothing comes to… wait, freakish movements, could it be…

(Could it be the rapid cancel dash?!!)

That was a respected technique that could only be executed by advanced Nekomimineko players, and there’s nothing, absolutely nothing freakish about it…

“It’s a misunderstanding! I have no plans to revive the Demon God.”

“Y-you’re lying! What about that hole…”

I vigorously shook my head.

“If you want to know the truth, then feel free to follow me.”

Saying that, I peeked into the gap. The inside was dim, but if this was the same as in the game then there should be light further in.

“W-wait…!”

Paying no attention to Train Girl’s shout, I jumped into the opening.

“…Oof.”

The hole was deeper than expected. I was a bit surprised by the sensation of weightlessness during the fall, but it wasn’t

anything this body in the game world wasn't able to deal with. I landed without much problem, and, moving forward a slight bit, waited for Train Girl.

"…Kya!"

Soon, Train Girl descended from the sky.

In the end she was still an adventurer. Fixing her pose in midair, she touched down splendidly on her two feet,

"Hya!?"

and slipped on the ground, landing on her butt.

"……"

"……"

An awkward silence filled the space.

"I-I'm here now! Hurry up and start explaining!"

She said forcefully, seeming to want to treat it as if nothing had happened.

However, I did not answer her. Turning my back to her, I started walking deeper into the cave.

"Please wait a minute! You promised that you would explain everything! Why aren't you saying anything!?"

Why, you say? Sigh, what an idiot. There was no way I could answer that. After all…

I hadn't even started thinking about what to say yet!

"…It's cold."

Hugging her shoulders, Train Girl muttered.

I shared her sentiment. Ever since going underground the air had become colder, and more than that there was something here that just made people shiver. This feeling that I was unable to experience in the game, a chill that wasn't due to the temperature, affected me as well.

"Let's go."

While I was aware of that, I didn't have any brainpower to spare worrying about Train Girl.

My mind was busy putting together all kinds of excuses and justifications.

But, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't come up with anything satisfactory.

(Now that it's come to this, should I try to run away using skills?)

I quickly thought about that option.

The only skills that I could use right now were the basic skills that did not require weapon mastery levels: the sword skill, Slash; the greatsword skill, Sideswipe; the magic skill, Energy Arrow; and just for completeness, the bare fists skill, Straight Punch, was also something that I could use. Other than that, there was just the movement skill Step that didn't depend on the weapon.

Weapon mastery increases from dealing damage to an opponent through attacking with a corresponding weapon. I had fought quite a bit at the Plateau of Sealing, and there should have been bonuses due to the level differences, so normally one would have expected to have learnt the second skill by now, but the issue this time was that Shiranui was too strong.

Mastery increases based on the number of attacks, so dealing with every enemy that appears with a single hit actually ended up slowing the leveling of weapon mastery.

Entering into the hole was partly to eliminate the difference in height so that Step could be used easier. However, Train Girl was fast, so it might be slightly difficult to actually escape from her.

If it was in the middle of the town with lots of places to hide then there might be a chance, but here I would probably be caught immediately when my stamina runs out. Also, if I ran away then I would completely lose any chance of coming up with an excuse.

For a moment I had considered whether to just straight up tell her everything, but unfortunately the truth sounds the most like a lie.

To say that actually, this world was originally a made-up place, and I somehow managed to end up here through the powers of the Lucky Mallet… it would be more believable to say that I was actually a mole reincarnated so that I would die if I didn't dig holes.

It's oft said that truth is stranger than fiction.

In that case I might as well take a gamble. Comparing the various settings that came to mind, I went with the one that seemed it would be the most convincing.

“You know what this place is, right?”

I asked in a tone that seemed like it was common knowledge.

To tell the truth, I don’t remember the data around the Demon God’s seal all that well. In order to avoid raising further suspicion by saying something weird, it was probably wise to have her spit out some information first.

“Ehh? Isn’t it a cave where a part of the Demon God is sealed?”

She asked in response. Why are you replying to a question with a question, I thought, but answered anyways.

“You’re half right, but half wrong. Here…”

Arriving at the back of the cave, there stood a large door.

To the two sides of that ominous door decorated with a number of empty holes, torches burned brightly.

“What’s this…?”

“This is the door that seals the Demon God’s Fragment.”

Hearing my words, Train Girl’s eyes opened wide.

“Ehh, but, wasn’t the seal that relief…”

“That’s nothing more than a marker to show where the Demon God is sealed. The actual seal is this door. …According to some, it’s said that this door leads to a different dimension. That’s why

no matter how hard you dig, there's no way to reach the Demon God's Fragment through normal means."

I tried to make myself sound as knowledgeable as I could.

Well, it's true that it was impossible to go through until after the last boss was defeated.

And even though I'm quite reckless, I wouldn't attempt something suicidal like challenging a dungeon with a recommended level of 250 while around level 10.

I would probably be instantly killed before I could even use any of my bug-exploiting techniques, and even with Shiranui I don't think I would be able to do any kind of decent damage. In the first place, if the labyrinth's seal was removed and somehow the monsters from inside managed to make their way outside, a small town like Ramlich would probably be destroyed in no time.

"So, what do you know about the Demon God's seal?"

I continued to use a patronizing tone. Even though I knew absolutely nothing about it.

"Uh, uhm, I've heard that the first king of Licht created his kingdom here because of reasons having to do with the seal…"

"…Anything else?"

"I-I'm sorry. I'm not too familiar about this topic…"

"I see."

While sounding disappointed, I nodded to myself in my mind.

(Mm, so that's how it all is.)

If that's the case, the royal family might be the descendents of the hero who defeated the Demon God. I remember hearing that the king and princess seemed to be quite strong based off of their data, so it wasn't impossible.

"U-uhm, is there something I should have known?"

Asked that, I tried replying with, "No, that's good". …Dear myself, what's good?

Seeing Train Girl look at me with the same question mark that was floating in my mind, I searched for words to continue the conversation.

This is completely irrelevant, but Train Girl, after nonchalantly following me all the way to a place like this, finally forgot to even keep her weapon trained on me. She was definitely the type that would be easily fooled by evil men.

It might not be a bad idea to start calling her Training Girl from now on.

"There exists an item called the Sunlight Stone which lets you enter this cave and acts as one of the keys to opening this door. It's one of the key items protecting the seal on the Demon God."

This was the truth. The Sunlight Stone was one of the drop items that was obtained through defeating the last boss.

I'm pretty sure I remembered this much correctly. In any case even if I was wrong nobody would be able to confirm or deny it until the last boss is defeated anyways.

Oh, that's it! I could try continuing along this line..

"However, I've received reports that this Sunlight Stone which the Kingdom of Licht was supposed to be safekeeping is somehow in the possession of the Demon Lord right now."

"No way!?"

Train Girl's voice was almost a shriek.

Ahh, this girl was such a great audience. Her reactions are always so earnest. I continued with much enthusiasm.

"Of course, it is not possible to release this seal with just the Sunlight Stone. But, the fact that this key to the seal which should have been put under the heaviest guard is now in the hands of the Demon Lord was not something that I could overlook."

Oh, but now that I think about how the other items for releasing the seal could be obtained, it seemed that most of them came from the drops of event bosses.

I'm sure those monsters would probably listen to the commands of the Demon Lord, so why hadn't the Demon Lord released the seal on the Demon God's Fragment yet? Maybe the setting was that he tried releasing the seal, but was stopped by the player before he could do so, or something like that?

Or maybe the world had only been safe because it was a Nekomimineko-quality world. I came to realize that it would probably be best if I secured at least one of the items needed to release the seal as soon as possible.

Even while I was thinking about such things, my tongue continued to move.

“That’s why I came to check whether the seal was still active.”

“S-so that’s what it was!?”

Train Girl’s voice grew louder in surprise.

Mm, I was surprised at myself too.

Still, I ignored her and started to examine the door… or at least pretended to.

“There are ten holes decorating this door. Even with one of them being the Sunlight Stone, releasing the seal requires a lot more items than one would expect, so the danger of the seal here being broken is probably rather low.”

“The seal… here? Are there other places where the Demon God’s Fragments are sealed?”

I did not reply to that question.

After all, I didn’t know, so I couldn’t just say something irresponsible. Ah, but, since it was called something like the Demon God’s Fragment, there’s probably more than one right? Thinking back, I felt as if there were quite a few event locations that gave off some kind of suspicious vibe.

And then, not sure how exactly she interpreted my silence, but Train Girl opened her mouth with an extremely serious expression.

“Mister Souma. It seems that you were neither a merchant, nor just a simple adventurer. What, exactly, are you?”

With a different meaning than before, Train Girl’s eyes fixated on me. Unable to stand her stare, I confessed.

“I am… I am a Protector of Seals. I travel around the world, checking on the seals of the Demon God.”

It just slipped out suddenly due to her anticipating look, but a Protector of Seals… what am I, a chuuni?!

“A Protector, of Seals…!”

Train Girl slowly repeated as if in awe.

Stop iiiit! I beg you, please stop repeating that phrase!

Once again, now with a glitter in her eyes, Train Girl looked towards me.

“So, that means there are seals in places other than here right? How are the other seals doing?”

“…That is something I can’t tell you.”

“Why not!?”

Obviously because I don’t know their status!

But of course, I couldn’t say that. That’s why, instead, I pointed my sword at Train Girl.

“That’s because I can’t fully trust you yet!”

“E-ehhhh!?”

When being doubted, it is possible to even the scales by expressing your suspicion of the other party! This is a very basic technique for arguments.

“In the first place, how did you end up appearing at that moment when I was investigating the relief? To go to such lengths to chase after me, isn’t it a bit excessive if you were just looking to thank your rescuer?”

“T-that’s…”

I continued to pile on absurd accusations.

“Also, you said that you were level 27. But how could an adventurer at only that level escape unharmed from such a large number of Mad Hounds? Aren’t you actually the one hiding something?”

“B-believe me! A-at that time, I was really just desperate… I’m really not hiding anything!!”

Yes, I believe you.

Still, I couldn’t give up my offensive after coming this far. I continued speaking.

“Was it really just a coincidence that you ran into me there?”

“Y-yes!”

It wasn’t actually a coincidence but rather an event though.

“Could you swear to God that that was the case?”

“Absolutely!”

“Then, even to the Demon God?”

I tried teasing her a bit.

This was more or less like saying, “Are you actually not the Dark Cultist here?”, but rather than getting mad, Train Girl nodded seriously.

“I’m not a Dark Cultist… but if you tell me to, I would even swear to the Demon God. I swear to God and the Demon God that it was a complete coincidence that I ran into you there!”

“…Understood.”

I had known that from the very beginning, but I said that and showed a nod.

I’m really the worst.

Also Train Girl’s really an angel!

As a result of this one-sided slandering, before I knew it we had mysteriously ended up with an even position.

For a while after that, Train Girl turned meek and silent, and finally, quietly muttered.

“…I’m going back.”

Her sudden change in attitude surprised me slightly, but I acted calm and asked in return.

“Are you sure? I’m still planning to stay here for a while longer to check up on the seal.”

Even though I claimed to be a Protector of Seals, there was no tangible proof of that. Though to be honest the name “Protector of Seals” sounded so cool that conversely it couldn’t have involved doing anything bad. I thought there was more than enough reason to be suspicious, but…

Train Girl’s expression was bright.

“I ended up coming here on impulse, but there was no way I could stop you with my strength anyways. I had been saved by you once. That’s why, I’ll try believing in you one more time, Souma.”

Leaving these words and a polite bow behind, Train Girl returned on the path we came from.

Train Girl really is an angel! But I really think I should start calling her Training Girl!!

Train Girl finally disappeared down the dark passageway.

“I-I made it through…!”

The moment I confirmed that, I collapsed to my knees. I quite despised myself, but somehow I was able to keep my cover until the end.

“I wonder if it would have been better to go with the reincarnated mole instead…”

The story grew so wild that in the end even I had no idea what I was talking about anymore. If I knew that was going to be the case, I felt like it would have been simpler to go with a much easier to understand lie like the mole one. Since it's Training Girl even a lie at that level probably would have worked.

…On second thought, maybe it would have been just a bit too absurd.

As I was letting the waves of relief wash over me like that while on my hands and knees,

"–What, are you doing, Souma?"

A familiar voice, yet one that I shouldn't be hearing right now, reached my ears.

The Train Girl that I had believed to have returned to the surface was standing there with an astonished look.

"Wh-why…?"

I asked, and a pained expression washed over her face.

"I really had planned to return to the town. But, I can't do that anymore. …Souma, there's something that I have to tell you no matter what."

What is it? Did I overlook something?

Did I make some kind of big mistake that made her suspicious?

Cutting off my confused, straying thoughts, Train Girl announced.

"–The ceiling is too high and I can't get back up."

…Ahh, I honestly had not considered that.

Part 4.

"It's so high…"

It was at least 3 meters to the hole in the ceiling. It would probably be impossible to climb up.

"Do you happen to have tools of any kind?"

Just to make sure, I asked Train Girl, but she shook her head and coldly replied, "If I had something like that then I wouldn't have been so troubled."

Once again, I looked upwards.

It really looked impossible to climb up without any tools. I wondered if I could somehow make it with the skills that I currently had, but it was definitely impossible.

It was possible to climb slopes with Step, but it could not be used to move vertically.

As a result, the current situation was that there was no way of leaving this cave.

“Is there nothing you can do about this, Souma?”

As if grasping at straws, Train Girl asked with a discouraged voice.

“…I guess in the worst case, we would have to dig a tunnel to the surface horizontally from the stairs by the entrance.”

I wanted to say something more reassuring, but this was the best I could do right now.

“So you have something that can be used to dig?”

I silently let this question filled with anticipation slip by.

I mean, my shovel broke.

(It’s not like I *didn’t* have anything that could dig either.)

It’s just that I wasn’t able to think of anything that wouldn’t end up taking a really long time.

For the time being, let’s do what we can.

“It’s a bit dark for us to start digging here. Let’s try to bring back some torches first.”

“…Okay.”

Leading the thoroughly disheartened Train Girl, we returned to the sealed door.

There were two torches on the sides of the door. It would probably be fine even if we took one.

I tried to pull out the torch on the right… huh?

“I-it won’t budge…”

I wonder if this world holds a grudge against me.

In the game, torches were fixed to the walls and it was not possible to dislodge or move them, but I had thought that now that this was reality, it should be easy to pick up.

“G-guuuuuh!”

Even when I tried using all of my strength, it wouldn’t move at all.

It would appear that the torches weren’t simply just inserted into the fixtures, but rather they were joined with the fixture embedded into the torch itself.

…This was a problem.

After the hassle of getting all the way here, I couldn’t even bring back a single torch.

(Wait, there is a way.)

Having come up with a great idea, I quickly pulled out Shiranui.

“Eh!? W-what are you doing, Souma!”

Train Girl shouted in shock, thinking I had gone mad.

But, there was a proper reason for this.

“If I can’t pull it out, then I should just cut it off.”

This was the sort of brilliance that had helped me find the smallest chances in the biggest of pinches. It might take a bit of time, but this was probably the most realistic option.

The only question is whether the torch could still be useable after being cut off, but in the worst case there was still another torch available. If it works then we would have a torch, and even if it doesn't work there was not much to lose. It was definitely worth a try.

Feeling lighthearted, I readied Shiranui, and took a swing…

"H-huh?"

With a sharp clunk, a sound that one wouldn't expect wood to make, Shiranui bounced off.

I couldn't really tell whether the torch had even been scratched.

"C'mon, one more time."

While slightly concerned, once again, this time with all my power, I swung my sword towards the torch.

"Uu!"

This time, with a thunk, my blow stopped at the surface of the torch. How was it? Did I successfully damage it?

I couldn't tell.

"…Doesn't look like it's working at all."

From behind, I heard a quiet grumbling. It was time to get a little serious.

"Stand back."

After making her move back, I also took some distance from the torch.

Of course, there was only one reason for this. It was so I could unleash the strongest attack I could use right now.

Holding Shiranui at the ready, with a loud shout I struck.

“Invisible Bl–”

–Clink!!

Feeling an extremely solid response, Shiranui stopped while still in the middle of its swing.

It wasn’t that the skill failed to activate. The skill had activated, but the target was too hard, so the skill was forcibly called off.

“…Doesn’t look like it’s working at all.”

Once again, Train Girl muttered from the back.

But it wasn’t completely not working!

That blow had indeed cut into the wooded torch. It was a slight dent that couldn’t be seen without looking at it closely, but the torch had been damaged!

This was the same as signaling my victory. If I just keep doing this, then eventually even this torch could be cut off.

“Uhm, if you just want a light, then I have an item that I’d be willing to use, so let’s go already?”

Ignoring Train Girl who was saying something from behind, I swung Shiranui again.

“Invisible Blade!”

I swung Shiranui with a yell, but it was stopped by the torch.

I must have done this tens of times already. Finally, the crack in the torch had become pronounced enough that it could be easily seen. My efforts were definitely paying off. Patch 1.09 was quite the patch.

Even Train Girl who had been slightly annoying at the start muttering complaints had stopped saying anything, perhaps having given up.

I was actually thankful for that. However, a new problem had come up.

(I might have gone a bit far with this.)

Having used full power each time, though I had managed to damage the torch, Shiranui was showing just a slight amount of accumulated damage as well. If I continued at this pace, then both would probably end up breaking.

After a short break, I decided to stop using skills from then on.

What's important was to continue dealing damage, no matter how little. There was no need to use fancy skills to increase the power of each single strike.

Luckily, this world was based off of a game, so I don't feel tired however much I swing my sword. Well, it's not that the stamina gauge doesn't decrease, but it was more than covered by the automatic recovery rate.

Having started silently swinging my sword again, this time with normal strikes, once again I heard a voice call out from behind me.

“I think you’re probably wasting your time with that.”

It was from Train Girl, who hadn’t said anything for a while.

“No, I don’t think so.”

I immediately replied, but Train Girl just shook her head.

“The damage that you did with skills has already vanished. That torch automatically regenerates HP.”

…I had noticed that a long time ago.

It was true that the crack I had made with my Invisible Blades had already been filled. The damage I was inflicting without using skills was so small that the moment after I hit it, the torch would have already healed up the damage.

Even then, I continued to incessantly swing my sword. Seeing me like this, Train Girl approached.

“Hey, Souma. Why don’t we give up here and return to the entrance? Maybe we’ll think of something by the time we get there. What do you say?”

She tried to persuade me with a sweet, angelic smile, but naturally I acted as if I hadn’t heard her.

Seeing my reaction, she spouted, “Hmpf, I don’t care about you anymore!” and sat down right on the spot. Even though she said

she didn't care it seemed like she was watching over me, but at least it seemed like she wasn't planning on saying anything anymore.

Watching her out of the corner of my vision, I continued to quietly chop at the torch.

"I'm going to sleep…"

Stopping for a moment to turn around, Train Girl was already fast asleep, leaning on the wall.

I'm not sure if she was daring, or if she was just lacking a sense of danger. While astonished by her carefreeness, what I had to do did not change.

While feeling Train Girl's peaceful breathing behind me, I continued to swing my right hand.

I wonder how long it's been since we came underground. The cutting of the torch had already become quite optimized, and now it looked like I was chopping cabbage, only moving Shiranui small distances.

I focused only on cutting the torch.

As I continued that action endlessly…

"So, you didn't attack me while I was asleep."

From behind, such a voice rang out. I turned around in surprise.

"You…!"

As for what I was surprised about, it was of course regarding her confidence in herself.

To think that I would definitely assault her if she slept, just how presumptuous was she?

Facing backwards, my eyes drifted from Train Girl's just awoken face… to slightly below it. To describe it crudely, she was definitely not a bullet train, but rather a normal train.

…Obviously I'm talking about her speed.

"T-that's not what I meant!"

Noticing my impure gaze, Train Girl hastily hid her body with her arms and yelled out.

"I meant like as a sacrifice to the Demon God or something! You know, something like the door opening if you present it with the blood of a v… virgin, something like that!"

"Ahh, mm. I get it."

So she still hadn't gotten rid of the suspicion that I was a Dark Cultist. What was all that she said about trusting me then?

It also felt like something she randomly said to try to cover up her nodding off, but I suddenly felt the urge to tease her a little.

"You seem to have slept quite well in spite of that though."

"…I-I wasn't sleeping! I was only acting like I was asleep to see what you would do."

Well played, Train Girl. But, unfortunately for you,

“There’s drool on the corner of your mouth…”

“What? You’re lying… uwahh!”

Train Girl quickly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and found her hand wet with drool.

I thought that she had no way out now, but Train Girl yelled once again.

“The drool was just an act too!”

“…I see, so the drool was an act.”

Even while holding such an incomprehensible conversation, my hand moved without rest.

Having found something to criticize, Train Girl tried to spark a comeback.

“I don’t want to be told off by someone who won’t stop doing something that they know is impossible!”

I can see why you would think that. I guess enough is enough.

“Then, let’s end this now.”

“…Huh?”

I took my distance from the torch like what I did at the start,

“Invisible Blade!”

and unemotionally executed that skill.

But this time, that one strike,

“Eh, ehhhhhh!?”

sliced the torch off the wall and sent it flying.

Leaving the lower half in the holder by the side of the door, the burning top half of the torch quietly fell onto the floor.

…Success.

(Alright!!)

I celebrated in my head.

Excitedly, I picked up the torch.

Turning towards Train Girl as if to say, “Take that”, she grumpily replied.

“Sure, that was pretty impressive… So, how exactly are we going to get out of here?”

…Ahh, I honestly had not considered that.

–Was that what you expected me to say? Something like that was of course not the case.

Having fulfilled my initial goal of obtaining the torch, I led Train Girl back to the entrance triumphantly.

Since we were here anyways, I raised the torch I just picked up above my head and inspected the hole in the ceiling.

“It really is quite narrow… but well, it might be good enough.”

A sword could end up getting jammed, but, if you force it through, there should be no problems.

As I was nodding to myself looking upwards with the torch raised,

“If you just wanted to look at the hole, there’s light shining through from above ground, so I don’t think you needed a torch.”

Train Girl kept pointing out the obvious.

Where did that quiet and obedient Train Girl go?

While thinking that, I put out the torch and placed it into my bag.

“Ehh!? You’re not going to use the torch anymore!?”

Of course ignoring Train Girl’s reaction, I pulled out Shiranui.

Looking at the hole, I adjusted by position.

“Hey, can you stand back a bit?”

After Train Girl moved back, I readied Shiranui.

Now, this is where it starts.

“Let’s do this!”

Taking a deep breath, I loudly ordered a skill.

“Ultimate–”

With the start of my words, I held out Shiranui.

“Sky-piercing–”

Next, I jumped with all my might, ascending with a speed that even exceeded that of Step.

It didn't matter that the sword caught on the edge of the hole, it just cut through it.

From the bottom of the hole, in one action I had jumped all the way until a few meters above ground.

After floating in place for a brief moment,

"–Sword!!"

On beat, I started a rapid diagonal descent meant to cut through aerial enemies. With a force that seemed it would split the earth, I swung Shiranui downwards!

"…Phew."

When the after-cast stun wore off, I was kneeling on the ground slightly beside the hole.

Escape, success.

"Whew, I somehow managed to get out…"

Some might think that I used some cheap trick again to get out, but that was not the case.

This time I neither used cancelling nor any kind of bug, and I even used the official name of the skill. The skill itself merely let you jump a bit higher, and there was nothing else special about it. It was a normal, ordinary skill.

–Yep.

Ultimate Sky-piercing Sword was a normal sword skill that, even without doing anything special and just raising one's sword

mastery level, one would eventually learn around the end of the game. It was the twelfth sword skill learned after Slash.

Part 5.

“I wonnderr what I’ll caatch today~”

I was having a blast fishing while cheerfully humming a tune.

“…Souma. You seem to be in a good mood.”

I thought I heard a spiteful, familiar voice, but immediately dismissed it as just my imagination.

The reason for my high spirits was simple. This early on, I had already been able to gain an incredibly useful item that was previously unattainable due to the game’s limitations.

The single torch sitting inside my bag right now was the main source of my joy.

Don’t look down on it just because it’s only a torch.

What I had was not one of those common torches that could be found anywhere.

It was the kind that sat at the pinnacle of Nekomimineko’s lighting items, the most famous torch of them all.

A great asset to many active Nekomimineko users, it was a level 250 super torch with automatic HP regeneration, commonly known as “Master Torch”.

How could it have earned a title like “Master”, despite being a mere torch? It was because this item was the fastest way to train weapon mastery levels.

Why do you think I even wanted to go to that cave in the first place? At my current level, it’s not like I could grind the enemies in the underground labyrinth, not to mention that without the right items I can’t even pass through the sealed door.

Regardless, I still went underground, just to obtain this Master Torch.

To increase weapon mastery, all you need to do is hit something with a weapon and deal damage in the process. Each time you hit, you gain weapon mastery, with a bonus based on the difference in levels between you and your target.

Point is, ‘hitting with a nonzero amount of damage’ ‘as rapidly as possible’ to ‘an opponent with the highest level you can handle’ is the key to increasing weapon mastery.

With that in mind, a common strategy had been to keep hitting a slow-moving, high-level monster with a weak weapon. One day, however, someone came along and made a revolutionary discovery.

He tried to see whether hitting items instead of monsters would also increase weapon mastery.

Certain items like weapons, armor, and limited-duration consumables such as lamps or torches are not only given a level but also have durability, represented as HP. If the only

requirement for increasing weapon mastery was to inflict damage to something, then wouldn't hitting an item with both a level and an HP value also increase weapon mastery?

That was his theory, and it turned out to work exactly that way in practice.

Increasing weapon mastery using inanimate items instead of monsters sounded like an extremely good idea on paper. However, it was quickly discovered that this idea was not all that effective.

To start with, an item drop with a higher level than your character is extremely rare. This is especially true for equipment, which is usually set at least a few levels below the character who obtained it. As a result, the method wasn't very efficient.

The only item that was high level, had HP, and could be found in the early game was the rope bridge used for a quest in Mount Gigal. In order to attack the bridge, though, you have to first defeat all the mobs in the area, so it ultimately wasn't possible without already being at a high level.

Finally, even if you got your hands on some high level equipment, the repair fee still barred your way. In the end, item HP is just durability, and in return for not decreasing by a huge amount unless you do something crazy, the HP of items much lower than that of monsters. Repair costs increase with level, too, so it would end up costing a large amount of Elements.

For all these reasons, it seemed like nonsense to attack items just for the sake of weapon mastery.

…Until the day that the Master Torch was discovered.

Anyone who had made it to the hidden dungeon knew that there were torches in front of the sealed door, but almost none of them paid the torches any attention.

One day, however, a certain John Smith (an alias, of course) suddenly stopped in front of the torches and tilted his head.

Other dungeons pretty much exclusively used baked lighting, which simply means that the lights were part of the landscape that players were unable to interact with. Only in this place was the torch an actual item rather than just a part of the landscape.

It could have been that this was the hidden dungeon so they wanted to go all out. Perhaps they just wanted some more realistic lighting. There were many such reasons that could explain this, but that was not what he found curious.

The question he had was, “How come this torch is burning every time I come?”

The HP limit for torches and lamps was an indicator for how long they could be used. That’s why torches and lamps slowly lose HP as they burn, and are destroyed when their HP runs out.

However, the torches in the hidden dungeon were different.

They must have been burning ever since the game first started, and in spite of that they never seemed to have been destroyed.

Finding that odd, he conducted many experiments to solve the mystery. As a result, he found out that those torches had a massive amount of hp compared with regular torches, and that they were self-healing. Furthermore, he found out that it was set at a super high level of 250, maybe to keep it thematic with the hidden dungeon.

These discoveries left Nekomimineko players in a state of ecstasy.

Though the last boss, the Demon Lord, was level 250, the small fries in the Demon Lord's Castle only went up to around level 200. Therefore, most players ended up clearing the game at around level 200.

Even if it was only available after clearing the game, being able to raise weapon mastery with an item 50 levels greater was extremely alluring.

In addition, its huge HP capacity and automatic regen meant that there was no need to spend Elements repairing it. As this information spread around the web, it soon became common knowledge in Nekomimineko that the torch in the underground labyrinth was a God Torch.

The entrance to the hidden dungeon soon became the place to train weapon mastery levels after clearing the game. Many players started to visit the God Torch daily, hitting it with the weapons of their choice.

Since it was easy to see item statuses in the game, there was no need to visually check whether any damage had been done. If you just look at the statuses of the two items, and if there was even 1 damage on either of them then you are good to go. It was as simple as that.

There were no special instructions needed to use it, there was no risk, and there wasn't anything else that even came close to its efficiency. It was impossible for something like that to not become popular. A movement worshipping the God Torch quickly grew to prominence within Nekomimineko.

On the other hand, the fastest group, which had already cleared the hidden dungeon and exceeded level 250, could only stamp the ground in regret… a position I found myself in.

Eventually, the God Torch by the underground labyrinth came to be called Master Torch, and the entrance to the underground labyrinth the Master Torch's Underground Dojo. Even with its effectiveness only between clearing the game and starting the hidden dungeon, it had garnered support that rivaled even the popular spot in Ramlich called the Marimite Dojo.

I had even restarted the game, going from level 1 and beating the Demon Lord at a low level (level 183), all just so that I could raise my weapon mastery level as I liked.

So anyways, the reason why I had continued to hit the torch after being trapped underground was not just to cut off the torch, but also to train at Master Torch's Underground Dojo in

order to learn a new skill that I could use to escape. Training here was the reason I came underground in the first place.

I did consider for a slight moment whether to tell Train Girl about the torch, but if you thought about it logically, being able to increase weapon mastery at a crazy pace just by hitting a torch was pretty absurd, and well… it kinda felt dishonest, or rather, cheap.

That's why I misled Train Girl into thinking that I was seriously trying to cut the torch, so that I could focus on increasing my weapon mastery level.

After all, there was close to a 240 level difference between me and Master Torch right now. I could somehow tell that every time I hit, my mastery increased by an insane amount, and it made me so excited that I even lost track of the time.

With this, I was able to learn the skill Ultimate Sky-piercing Sword, which would originally have been learned around the time I cleared the game. In addition, as a result of weapon mastery directly affecting skill attack power, which has been the case ever since version 1.09, I obtained offensive power incomparable to what I had before.

With Master Torch now inside my bag, I can train weapon mastery anywhere, as much as I want. I'm really looking forward to that.

Ahh, but, let's see, for now, rather than focusing on my weapon…

“Souma!”

My thoughts were interrupted by Train Girl’s yell.

Taking a good look, Train Girl was glaring at me with tears in her eyes.

Seeing that, I finally remembered. That’s right, I was in the middle of fishing.

“I still don’t know whether you’re a good person or a bad person, Souma. …There’s only one thing that I’ve figured out.”

Of course, it was not normal fishing. The fishing line was some rope that I bought in the town, the fishing hole was in the Plateau of Sealing, and what I was trying to fish was–

“Souma, you’re a mean person!!”

–Train Girl, shouting at me like that from beneath the hole.

After escaping from hole, I had to go buy some rope in the town in order to rescue Train Girl. I had been planning to dangle the rope down the hole and pull Train Girl up, but…

Every time Train Girl would almost touch the rope,

“You were so close! Just a little bit more!”

I’d be so amused seeing her jumping around like that that I’d ended up playing around with her.

It was only natural that I would be called mean.

“Ahh, I wish I bought a longer rope.”

Continuing to tease her, I shook the end of the rope at a height that was just beyond reach of her hands. Just like a cat with something dangled in front of it, she reached her hands here and there.

After noticing me grinning at her futile efforts,

“Also, your personality is really warped too!”

she once again shouted at me from below.

Wait a moment, didn’t she say that she had only figured out one thing?

I felt bad for playing with her for so long, so when I found a good opportunity I pulled her up. With the game-level strength I had, Train Girl was successfully rescued, and

“F-for now, I’ll thank you for rescuing me. Thank you very much. B-but, that doesn’t mean that I trust you yet!”

leaving behind one last shout, she dashed back into town at full speed.

I hoped to never meet her ever again.

“Today was an exhausting day.”

The second day of my life inside a game had been much busier than I had imagined.

I had actually planned to head out of town once more to stop by some other place that I hadn’t visited yet, but I ended up moving

that to tomorrow. For now, I quietly headed straight back to the inn.

I went and apologized to the inn's owner, who appeared to recognize me. When I told him I'd broken his shovel and asked to pay for it, his rugged face broke out into a grin,

"Don't worry about it. If you're gonna stay here for awhile, then that's just some small change."

followed by a hearty laugh.

In stark contrast to his looks, he was a good guy. I swore to myself that I would buy a new shovel for him in town tomorrow.

"Dinner's gonna be ready soon, so come on down in about 30 minutes!"

With those words shoved on my back, I entered my room.

After checking that the Master Torch was still usable and that Shiranui wasn't going to break any time soon, I headed back downstairs.

Arriving at the dining room, I found the inn's owner awaiting me, along with someone who looked familiar, yet was not the other guest at the inn last night. Spotting me, that figure ran up to me, smiling from ear to ear.

"I'll be staying here from today onwards. My name is Ina Traille! Nice to meet you!"

Ignoring her and her expression filled with accomplishment, I turned towards the inn owner.

“Sorry. It looks like I can’t stay here any longer.”

“What do you mean?!”

Looking at Train Girl, her cheeks puffed up with anger, I had finally come to realize that *those words* were indeed the truth.

–You can’t run from Train Girl!!

Extra.

Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki ››› “Nekomimineko Glossary”

Ina Traille (Character)

The trauma creation machine of the early game, commonly called Train Girl.
In the first character rankings, she accomplished the legend of taking first place in both the most popular and least popular rankings.
Looking at the wiki comments, however, she had surprisingly good reviews, like “she has no breasts, but if you look carefully she’s quite cute”, “she tries really hard for a cutting board”, “brave, but tiny boobs lol”, “flat, but that’s good”.
It does also just seem like some group of people with a special fetish just happened to group here.

The Cave of Mimicry (Dungeon)

A super first-timer killer dungeon where all of the monsters that appear are Mimics.
Of course some treasure boxes are Mimics, but also some doors

and walls are Mimics, and the contents of treasure boxes could be Mimics.
On the other hand there were treasure boxes that were shaped like other monsters. It was a dungeon bursting with the hidden evilness of Nekomimineko.
The setup with the last room being completely made of Mimics really made one want to complain about the unfairness.

Life-Saving Medicine (Quest)
In order to save the life of my seriously injured son, bring me three potions, was the quest contents.
The reward is the Beginner Adventurer Consumables Set, which contains three torches, ten darts, five MP potions… and, ten potions.
Though satisfied with the rewards, it makes one want to shout at them that isn't there someone they should be saving with those items?

Beastle Killer (Item)
An item that makes you double-check its name.
Players that believe it was a misspelling of Beast Killer keep appearing, and they try to use it to attack beasts, but that is incorrect.
This weapon is only super effective on bug-type monsters. To realize this and shout, "Oh, so it was actually Beetle Killer!" is a rite of passage of Nekomimineko.

Chapter 3 – Train Mode.

Part 1.

This was the third day of my life in a game.

A refreshing morning greeted me. I felt like I had done quite some hard work the day before, but perhaps due to being in a game world, I didn't feel the least bit exhausted.

In a cheerful mood, I opened the door to my room…

"Good morning, Souma! So, um, I spent all of last night thinking about it and decided that in order to make sure you're not a bad person I'll be monitoring you from–Ehhhh!?"

I immediately closed the door, turned around, dashed through the room, opened the window, and jumped out. The moment I touched the ground I used Sky-piercer to jump onto the roof of a nearby building, and started using Step to move across the rooftops.

It was an impressive maneuver if I do say so myself.

In under twenty seconds, I succeeded in completely escaping from Train Girl.

"Shit…!"

After covering a large distance, jumping back down to ground level and stopping, I realized what I had done.

I ended up escaping on reflex, but thinking about it, today I had been planning on going around to some stores for shopping, and

there was nothing I would be doing that would be problematic if seen. There was no problem even if Train Girl tagged along.

But now that I had run away like this it would be tough to face her, and thus harder to go to the main streets where the chance of bumping into her would be high. It was a huge blunder.

Still, wouldn't you say that someone who instinctively runs away when suddenly talked to would be something like a true loner?

"So basically, as a true loner, this is a chronic disease that I have to live with for the rest of my life!"

Though I somehow summarized it in a chuuni kind of way, it wasn't really something to be proud of.

Also, I only became a loner after I entered university and started prioritizing games over human relationships, so my history as a loner was quite short. Likewise, I probably won't stay this way for the rest of my life.

It's just that, I hadn't told her any of the small details like when I usually wake up, so that would mean that she had probably been waiting in front of the door for a while, and thinking about it like that you'd normally feel disturbed. Somehow I was starting to feel that maybe running away was actually the right choice.

In the first place, it seemed like since I first met her, everything she did was to try to follow me, but at the moment I did not intend to accept any companions. Right now, I just wanted to

stay as far away from other people as possible, and focus on strengthening myself.

If this could serve to increase my distance from Train Girl, then in a sense this could be just what I wish for.

With that as a change of mood, I started to think about what to do next.

There were tons of things that I had to do, so for now let's do something where I likely won't run into Train Girl. Being careful of her investigation skills this time, I took off the conspicuous mithril armor and clad myself in the beginner equipment. With this, I should be a lot harder to pin down.

Still, if I was to stay in a field for a certain amount of time, then Train Girl will be automatically summoned there. She's really a troublesome person, but this time it wasn't much of a problem.

After all, I was not planning on venturing outside of this town for the next while.

–I'm going to become a shut-in.

Though it was cool saying that out loud, the actual reason was because I didn't want to level up my character too much before raising my weapon mastery levels some more.

The reason why I was able to raise my weapon mastery levels so efficiently with the Master Torch was because my level was so low. Since there were no means to lower one's level, it would be a shame to lessen this advantage by battling outside.

Really, there was probably not too much of a difference between a level gap of 240 levels versus 200 levels, but since I had things to do in town anyways I might as well work on that rather than going outside.

“Things I need to do in town, huh.”

I vacantly muttered a string of words that came to mind.

At that phrase, I recalled, vividly, a particular scene.

There were roughly 3 areas in which Nekomimineko characters could improve in.

Character level, weapon mastery, and skill mastery.

As normally in RPGs, character levels can be raised by earning experience from defeating monsters. The experience that can be gained from a monster is the level of the monster multiplied with an experience multiplier that depends on the monster’s type.

Normally, rare or strong monsters like bosses would have a higher multiplier, while small fries would have a low multiplier, but with Nekomimineko quality the settings seemed rather arbitrary, so there were clearly great monsters and worthless monsters.

Of course, items that have HP have this experience multiplier set at 0, so unfortunately no matter how many items one destroys they will not level up.

Since the experience is completely given to the person who dealt the final blow, attackers have an extreme advantage when grinding.

On the other hand, no matter how much a healer devotes to healing their companions, they will not receive a single bit of experience, so it was the worst, most unfortunate class.

If Nekomimineko had become an MMO, there was no doubt that it would have been a tragedy where everyone in a party would be an attacker.

For a moment I was honestly glad that Nekomimineko did not become an MMO.

I went slightly off topic, but as I was saying, right now I had no intention of raising my character level, and my weapon mastery could be trained any time now that I had the torch, so there was no need to leave the town.

Thus, the only thing left was to raise my skill mastery.

Skill mastery referred to the mastery associated with each individual skill such as Step.

The stamina gauge that is consumed whenever a skill is used doesn't get its maximum value increased through level ups. In that case, one would think that the number of times a skill could be continuously used would be the same no matter how much one trained, but that was not the case.

This is where the effect of skill mastery appears.

By using a skill repeatedly, its skill mastery goes up, and as a result the efficiency of the skill goes up, reducing the amount of stamina consumed. Even if the maximum stamina value was constant, since the amount of stamina consumed is different, veteran players are able to continuously cast more skills than beginner players.

As for how exactly to measure skill mastery, it was simply 'the number of times the skill had been used'. Whether the attack hit, whether any damage was done, and whether the opponent's level was high or low were completely irrelevant. Whether you hit a boss or cancel it or just hit thin air, as long as the skill is used it increases mastery by 1.

It was a plain and simple system.

But as a result, it was a system with the fewest shortcuts.

Cheap tricks like defeating high level monsters to quickly level up or to continue to hit a high level item to rapidly level up could not be used here.

If, even then, you wanted to do this effectively…

"I guess there's no choice but to go to the Marimite Dojo."

Saying the conclusion that I had known all along, I heaved a heavy sigh.

To be frank, Marimite Dojo is hard to handle for me. With my poor communication skills, along with not having any kind of special fetishes, the hurdle for *that* was a bit high.

Especially doing that in what was now reality, just thinking about it makes my stomach hurt.

“But well, can’t hurt to take a look.”

Therefore, I headed towards the outskirts of town.

There were no shops in that direction, just an old and large church, the only one in this town.

Part 2.

–It was when Nekomimineko was still in its infancy.

During this time when not even the rapid cancel dash had been discovered, there had been one video that became the topic of discussion between Nekomimineko players.

The title of that video was “The Repenting Man”.

It was a very concise video of a man relentlessly hitting his head against the wall inside of a white room.

“It’s been a while since I’ve come here.”

While soaking in the unique atmosphere of a church, I stepped into a room filled with the sound of a pipe organ.

I hadn’t visited this place recently, even in the game.

It’s been a great help in the early game, but the basic functions of a church in this game was to cure abnormal statuses. In Nekomimineko where it’s comparably easy to learn abnormal

status curing magic, it was rare to be using the services of a church past the mid game.

However, this time I did not come to cure any abnormal statuses. There was one other function of this church that every Nekomimineko player knew about.

That was the reason for my visit.

“Excuse me!”

I unhesitatingly walked through the church, and called out to a kind-looking sister standing inside.

“How may I help you?”

Her name was Marielle. She was a sister of this church, and also the one who watched over a certain room.

“Uhmm.”

As her innocent smile somehow stimulated my sense of guilt, I decided that that was exactly the spice I needed in order to for this request to succeed, so making up my mind, I opened my mouth.

“I would like to use the confession room.”

The confession room was, as its name suggests, a room where one repents by confessing their sins to God. Only, the one actually listening would not be God but rather the priest, so it may be easier to think of it as a small partitioned room where the confessor and priest hold a life counselling session through a small window.

It wasn't clear what was the reason for this game to have something like a confession room, but apparently in an early Nekomimineko promotion there had been a caption "Event contents are affected by karma! All new drama filled penance system!", so it is plausible it was created as part of that.

But, in the end, Nekomimineko did not come equipped with any such penance system, so like the Pardoning Charm sold in the church (Cost: 100,000 Elements. Use: None), this confession room became something that had no meaning within the system. Still, there was a group of enthusiasts.

When they told the sister here, Marielle, that they wanted to confess,

"Have you come for a confession? I'm deeply sorry. The priest is currently out."

she would turn them down like that.

It smells like some kind of event flag, but if you actually back down here then it would not be possible to use the confession room.

However, if you keep bugging her, then surprisingly Marielle herself would enter the confession room and listen to the players.

In the real world, it might have been a problem if a sister suddenly agrees to hold a confession without the priest, but this was inside a game, and what's more, inside Nekomimineko. There was nobody who would care about something like this.

Marielle was quite a beauty, and after all she was a sister, so in a sense having her was way better than having a priest. Because of that reason, it seemed there had been some players (mainly male) who came here to confess.

Just a side note, but no matter how long one waits the priest who had gone out does not end up returning to this church. Since he never comes back, many speculations and conspiracy theories were thrown around such as “the priest is actually the last boss theory”, “widow Marielle”, “Marielle = priest hypothesis”, or “the priest’s murderer is Marielle thesis”, but the truth is still not known.

To be cynical, I felt like the truth might have been that the character for the priest hadn’t been made so they decided to just gloss over the issue, but in any case the truth isn’t important.

Now then, about the confession room, this was a special place that was clearly different from all other places.

According to Marielle, since the confession room was the place in the world closest to God, it was completely cut off from the impurities of this world. Well, I don’t know about God and the likes, but it was true that this small space was treated as special even by the game.

It would probably be okay to call this an absolute safety zone.

In here, neither HP, MP, nor even stamina values change; even if you hit someone with a weapon no damage would be done; furthermore, weapon skills and magic could not be cast.

Movement skills like Step were the only ones that could be used, but in a small room like this you would undoubtedly bump into the walls or the ceiling and the skill would be interrupted.

There was no real reason to use them anyways, but of course even if you were to bump into the walls you would take no damage here.

In this fantasy world of swords and magic, this was the only place with a different set of rules. It was as if this was truly a space ruled by God. …That would be what a normal person would think. But, a VR gamer at heart would have a different thought.

…So weapon skills and magic can't be used?

But can't you use movement skills without losing any stamina!

…So even if you use movement skills you would just bump into the walls and have them cancelled?

There was no impact damage, and the animation is cancelled so can't you immediately cast the skill again?!

…So there was no reason to use movement skills?

Every time a skill is used, doesn't its skill mastery goes up?!

Everyone! Let's charge into the walls of the confession room with movement skills!!

Something like that would happen.

Normally, in the early game one could only use Step four times without resting before running out of stamina.

In addition, without cancelling, the time for one skill cast plus the after-cast stun was long, and it was normal to take close to 10 seconds for just four Steps.

However, in the confession room where there was no stamina cost nor damage, that was no longer a problem.

No matter how many times Step is used, you wouldn't run out of stamina, and you wouldn't even take any damage or feel any pain from cancelling Step by running into a wall.

Using this, a certain player uploaded a video of them activating Step at an impressive four times a second.

The process was simple. Position your body close to the wall of the confession room, and repeatedly activate Step with the right timing. Activate Step, cancel the skill by bumping into the wall, activate Step… like that, repeated over and over, leads to the skill mastery for Step increasing at an amazing rate.

To an observer, it would look like an act of atonement through bashing one's head against the wall.

Thus, the famous video "The Repenting Man" was born.

As soon as this video hit, everyone rushed to the confession room to try to replicate it. Though the skills that could be improved were limited to movement skills, its efficiency was extraordinary, and there were no risks.

There was just one single, unexpected complication to this method.

In this confession room, the entrance was at the back, and in the front was the partition with a small table-like surface stuck to it, so you would necessarily end up using Step while pressed to one of the side walls.

Then, after you finish with your long, repetitive training, you would inadvertently glance to the side, and notice them.

Motionlessly, constantly watching you hit your head against the wall, was a pair of eyes.

…That's right. Calmly seeing every single detail of your bizarre actions was Marielle.

In order to enter the confession room, Marielle's permission was needed. That's why, when the player is using the confession room, Marielle was inevitably on the other side of the partition.

Whether it was due to Marielle's AI being simple, or perhaps due to an oversight in her thought routine settings while inside the confession room, even when the player does something as ridiculous as continuously bashing their head on the wall, Marielle would take no action whatsoever.

The only thing she would do is, in response to the player having said nothing at all since entering the confession room,

"Did you have anything you would like to confess today?"

“It may be difficult, but talking about it is one way to get it off your chest.”

is how she would try to prompt the player into confession.

Even that slowly turns into agitation,

“If you won’t say anything, then I won’t say anything either.”

“Were you lying when you said you had something to confess?”

and finally,

“The exit is that way.”

is the last thing she says. That in itself is quite distressing, but the true terror is what comes after.

Having run out of preprogrammed lines, she starts to silently stare at the player.

…How exactly is that a problem? You probably wouldn’t understand just from hearing it.

I didn’t pay much attention to it when I saw it on the net either.

But, when you actually try to raise your skill mastery in the confession room, that is when you will realize its terror.

At first, it wasn’t any problem at all. I just felt a bit embarrassed being watched by a beauty.

But, at some point, when I noticed that neither her expression nor posture had changed one bit since a few minutes ago, a gear slipped.

Just by watching me and not doing anything else, I became intensely aware of the existence of Marielle. I tried incessantly switching the wall I was using, and only at those times, her head moved.

Matching my movements, slowly, wordlessly, those eyes followed me.

This was a tight space without any distractions. Despite telling myself to ignore it, once it had touched my thoughts it was impossible. I couldn't help but be aware that she was watching me. I couldn't focus on the use of my skills anymore.

Even if I had been able to focus and drive the thoughts of Marielle out of my mind, then conversely when I arose I would end up seeing Marielle's face while unguarded.

……

Then, I would realize.

I had been watched.

For the entire time, constantly, I had been watched.

Even while I was concentrating and had forgotten about her, during that time, she was always watching me.

…I was being watched.

…She was watching me.

And when I actually turn my gaze towards her, her eyes were looking at me, as expected.

…Watching me.

Not blinking even once, with only a slim smile on her face, perpetually.

–She was always, watching me!

Continually repeating a monotonous task easily leads to drowsiness, a state in which it was easy to fall prey to suggestion.

That effect may have been a factor in causing one-third of the people who challenged this to lose heart at Marielle's gaze and to end up escaping.

There were some who did not mind it at all, and even some that claimed being watched was like a kind of reward, but

unfortunately it seemed that I was more of the sensitive kind, resulting in a painful memory of running away from Marielle's scrutiny in the middle.

This was a place where at the same time as raising skill mastery, the player's heart was tested, the Marimite Dojo.

…However.

I am the only one who knows this world is a game, but at the same time this world is also reality.

As part of reality, situations that could not occur in the game could be created.

"Have you come for a confession? I'm deeply sorry. The priest is currently out."

That's why, this time,

"I understand. This…"

while Marielle was saying that and heading towards the confession room, I stopped her!

"Sorry. Um, I would like to have a quiet chat with God alone. So if you could lend me just the room…"

…Did it work?

I patiently waited for her reply.

"…Is that so. Then, please use the room as you wish."

With a warm smile, Marielle replied.

(I did it!)

My heart jumped for joy.

Today, at this moment, I had overcome the greatest obstacle of Marimite Dojo!

Seen off by the smiling Marielle, I entered the confession room.

Of course, Marielle was not there watching me from the other side. Though it was a familiar place, it felt fresh.

(Alright, I can do this.)

Approaching the wall, I took my place.

Since this was now reality, I didn't know how long I could use this place for. I had a slight reservation about using movement skills against a wall, but I shook off my hesitation and used a skill.

(Step!)

Boom, a dull sound reverberated, as my head banged against the wall. However, contrary to that painful noise my body felt no pain.

It's working. Even in this world, I can train mastery without any problems.

(Step! Step, Step, Step!)

–Boom! Boo, boo, boom!

The dull sounds that echoed off the wall reported my skills' successes.

Pleased with that, I slowly raised my speed.

(Step, Step, Step, StepStepStepStepStep!)

–Boo, Boo, Boo, Boobooboobooboom!

Along with the pace at which Step was being used, the impact sound also increased in speed.

It was actually becoming fun.

(StepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStopStepStepStepStep!)

–BooBooBooBooBooBooBooBoomBooBooBooBoom!

I became absorbed in the task.

The only thing in my mind was Step.

How can I further accelerate the rate at which I use Step.
Thoughts of only that filled my mind.

(StepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStepSkipStepStepStepStepStepStepStepStep!)

–

BooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBoomBooBooBooBooBooBooBoom!

Everything except Step disappeared from the world.

What laid in front of me was a world without anything extra, just me and Step.

I can do this. With my current concentration, I can overcome my limits.

I can go where noone has gone before.

Transcending the wall of four times a second, I'll reach five skill a second, no, even more than that!

(StepStepStepSt

The fact the the noise was starting to bother me was a proof that my concentration was still not perfect.

I have to focus harder on Step, and Step only.

“Stop! Please, stop, this…!”

Suddenly, the sensation of something soft and warm wrapped around my body.

This was a huge trial. But, I won’t lose!

“Could he be so entranced in the act of atonement that he hasn’t noticed me yet? What a strong conscience and piety! But if that’s the case, then even more so, I can’t let this person continue with his acts of self-harm!”

If distractions were bothering me, then I just need to overcome those distractions.

The moment I stop feeling even this bothersome softness would probably be the moment where I reach the heights of my concentration.

“Someone! Please come! Come to the confession room–!!”

Ahh, I can see it. I can finally see it. I can see the next worl–

Since then…

“Please reflect on your actions!”

“…I’m sorry.”

I had been torn away from the wall and forcefully dragged to a room in the back by Marielle's group, and made to reflect on my actions. It seemed that the sound of my head hitting the wall was rather noisy.

If there were things that couldn't be done in the game world that can be done here, then there could also be things that could be done in the game world that can't be done here anymore.This concept seemed obvious now in hindsight.

Still, it must be a pretty rare experience being forced to repent about going into a confession room, but I didn't feel happy about that. It would be troublesome if I couldn't use Marimite Dojo anymore.

So there I tried to explain, "It's something that I absolutely, really need to do no matter what!" while crying, and unexpectedly she was the one who gave in.

With two conditions, I was allowed the use of the confession room. As long as it was after 9pm where there were few churchgoers around, and that I did my headbutts on a sound absorbing mat that will be installed on the wall of the confession room.

I wasn't really doing headbutts, but it seemed like a pain to explain so I let it through. After all, even if it was with conditions, I had gotten permission to use the room, so I had no reason to complain.

"Thank you very much!"

I left the church after giving Marielle a big bow.

But man, even though I had caused such a commotion, she had been kind to me.

To something like a nuisance like me, she kept glancing over with sympathetic looks after the lecturing ended, and reached out with careful warm words to a degree where she was almost overdoing it.

As expected of one who serves God, she had a big heart.

…There was just one thing.

“More than anything, God wishes for man to live their life to the fullest.”

“There are still many joys that you have yet to discover in this world.”

“As long as you’re alive, something good is sure to happen!”

I found it a bit annoying that preaching words like these, as if trying to change the mind of someone contemplating suicide, were frequently thrown around, but I guess it’s expected since she’s a sister.

Anyways, the preparations for the future was now complete. I felt rather refreshed.

With a good mood, I opened the door of the church…

“I finally found you, Souma–ehhhh!?”

Seeing a familiar face nearby, I dashed full speed towards the opposite direction.

“P-please wait!”

As I did so, naturally that acquaintance, Train Girl, chased after me. What’s more, she was as fast as ever. If this keeps up then she might catch up, but because I chose a bad direction to escape towards, there weren’t any tall buildings that I could climb with Sky-piercer nearby.

I would’ve liked to use the rapid cancel dash, but in my current situation with my skill levels still rather low, I would likely run out of stamina in no time.

Even if it was only a short time, having taken advantage of the Marimite Dojo should have reduced the stamina expenditure for Step, but the expenditure for Slash which would need to be used for cancelling was still unchanged.

Rather than cancelling with Slash, Sideswipe might be slightly better since I had been using it on the torch, but that had its own problems where one bad activation could mean innocent passersby being sliced in half.

It was too dangerous to be used in town.

“Why are you running away from me!”

“That’s because you’re chasing me!”

While running, we yelled at each other.

“In, in that case, what would you do if I just stopped right now?”

“I’ll remember a sudden emergency and run away!”

“Then aren’t you still running away in the end!”

Well, that was certainly true. Still, it was also true that I was running away because I was being chased. If Train Girl would only just give up then I wouldn’t have any need to run away.

“Why are you following me around anyways! Do you still suspect that I’m a dark cultist?”

“N-no, that’s…”

At a loss of words for the first time, she stopped moving.

I could have probably escaped with that chance, but that wouldn’t solve the problem.

Making sure to keep my distance, I also stopped.

“This morning, you said you were following me to monitor me or something?”

I asked a rhetorical question, and unusually, she answered with a slurred mumbling.

“That’s, right. But really, I already believe you, Souma… Ah, I don’t really understand the difficult stuff like the Demon Lord’s seal, but I had a feeling, that you were probably not a bad person, um…”

She was not being clear. I lost my patience slightly.

“Then, why are you still chasing me?”

“Eh? …Um, I mean, you’re my life’s savior, and, ah! I’ve never met anyone like you before, so I need to observe you…”

What’s going on?

This meant that she had no actual reason for following me.

Controlling the feeling of annoyance rising inside me, I tried to talk to her as rationally as possible.

“Sorry, but I’m trying to get stronger as an adventurer here.”

“M-me too!”

An unnecessary agreement was voiced, but I ignored it.

“There are some pieces of information that only I know, and also battle techniques that I don’t want others to know about. If it’s possible, I would like to stay away from others for the next while.”

“I, understand… s-still!”

Seeing that she was still reluctantly trying to hang on, I steeled my heart and laid it to her straight.

“…You’re a nuisance. If you’re only following me out of curiosity, could you please stop?”

“Ah…”

Hearing my words, she froze completely.

It seemed that guilt was consuming her. I’m sure she was only chasing me out of curiosity. If that was not the case, what other reason would she have?

Did she fall for me at first sight because of some sort of player bonus or life-saver bonus?

…Ridiculous.

Those kind of things only happened inside manga or games. Well, this is a world based on a game, but even back within the game something like that never happened in Nekomimineko.

“T-that’s not it. Please wait.”

Even then, she still tried to call me back, but,

“You’ll be fine by yourself. When you’re really troubled, then if you come visit that inn, I’d be willing to lend a bit of my help.”

paying no heed to that, I turned my back to her and started walking away.

After all, she didn’t need any help. As long as I, the player, did not dawdle in a field for a fixed time, she would not end up in a situation of being chased by that many monsters.

Furthermore, though she introduced herself as a beginner adventurer, enemies above level 30 didn’t usually appear in the fields around Ramlich.

I had no idea what kind of party she belonged to, or how much demand there is for dagger users, but with her current ability it shouldn’t be hard for her to get by in this town.

However, even then she was desperate to stop me.

“Wait, please. I, I…!”

But I had already decided that I would not stop no matter what she said.

In university, I was a loner.

It wasn't that I had especially wished for it to happen, nor did I particularly wish for it not to happen.

It wasn't that I didn't want to have anything to do with anyone, but when you have something to do, you wouldn't go out of the way to deal with other people. The fact of this reality was that, compared to other people, I could cut off relations with much less hesitation.

At the very least, right now I had no need for a connection with her. Unless she was really in deep trouble, I had no obligation to lend a hand.

That's why, this was farewell to Train Girl.

However, that resolve…

"_____!!"

was smashed into smithereens by her words that followed.

"What, did you, say…?"

They were just like magic words.

Those words contained enough power to cause me, who basically was disinterested in others to a point where I earned the nickname of The Phantom of the Class, to stop in my tracks.

Actually, maybe it was more because I was such a person.

“Could you repeat that, one more time?”

After I turned around and said that, she, in a slightly embarrassed voice, once again spoke those words.

“–I don’t have any friends.”

Ahhh, how could this be.

I looked towards the sky and muttered in my heart.

–Train Girl, you’re also a [loner] huh?

Part 3.

“To tell you the truth, since I’ve started being an adventurer, I’ve never been in a party with anyone before.”

We were in the restaurant/bar on the first floor of the inn. It was there that Train Girl, while slowly sipping on some fruit juice contained in a beer mug, started telling her story.

Though I feel bad for saying it, just by looking at her you could tell that, “Ah, this girl is a loner.” She was giving off some kind of aura which made this fact easy to accept.

“It was really tough when the guards would look at me like, ‘Huh? Could this girl be going out alone?’. It was still tough after they got used to it and started looking at me like, ‘Ah, it’s just the usual loner’. I-it’s not like I was alone because I wanted to be! I want to have fun and exciting adventures with other people too! If they were going to look at me like that couldn’t they at least accompany me or something!!”

She was completely delusional. A full-blown persecution complex.

But, well, I wasn’t a stranger to being a loner, so I could somewhat understand her feelings.

“…Uhm, yeah, and trying to do everything by yourself doesn’t always work out. It was quite troublesome that I didn’t have anyone I could ask for help when cramming in uni.”

For a moment Train Girl seemed confused, “Uni? Cramming?”, but she seemed to have disregarded it as unimportant. Sprawling forwards on the table, she started ranting even more passionately.

“That! Exactly that! Since there was nobody that I could ask, I end up super scared when exploring dungeons and stuff! Especially when I find a hidden room not on the map, normally that should be something to be happy about, but I end up worrying that I read the map wrong or something…”

“Yeah! Definitely! Also, there’s like, since eating by yourself in a crowd of people is, you know, so I try to find somewhere with

good sunshine and few people like some stairs outside to eat my sandwich or something, but end up being really really self conscious about it! Even though I hadn't done anything bad, when I hear people talking or see them walking by I end up reflexively hiding!"

"So it wasn't just me! I get extremely nervous when there's a lot of people around too! I go to the cafeteria on the other side of town quite often, and it's always busy and full of people, and I end up worrying what the other people think about that girl who always sits by herself…"

"Ahh I understand! I totally know that feeling! Since I have no friends I always sit at the very front during lectures, and well because of that I have pretty good grades and I've learned quite a bit, but like I get quite concerned about whether people are judging me! When I hear the group of girls behind me talking, I end up wondering whether they're badmouthing me and start eavesdropping on them, even though there was no way they would have been!"

"Mm! That's right! There was some kind of Adventurer Appreciation Tea at the town cafeteria a while ago so I went, but I didn't really know anyone so I couldn't join any of the conversations, and since I was always just standing by myself the people around started giving me weird looks… In the end, I couldn't stand it anymore so I ended up going home before even 30 minutes had passed."

“I know! Man, these kinds of celebration events are really hard on loners! When the people in my class are organizing a drinking party, they’re like all friendly with everyone else but when it comes to me they ask me with, ‘Ah, Souma, you’re fine with not going to the party right?’! Like, why are you assuming that I don’t want to come, or more like, are you pressuring me not to come?! But well, I wouldn’t go anyways, so I am happy that they at least came to ask… but you know…”

“D-don’t worry! I completely understand those feelings!”

“Train Girl!!”

“Souma!!”

Having bonded in merely minutes, we exchanged a firm handshake above the table.

The start of a budding friendship. Glistening eyes staring at each other.

“…Oi, my shop’s not a place for you to be lovey-dovey in.”

However, that sense of connection was quickly destroyed by the boorish words of the passing inn owner.

Train Girl jumped up with surprise and quickly took her distance from me, and, stammering, looked at her right hand which had touched mine.

“S-sorry…”

Probably now feeling embarrassed about being overly excited, Train Girl lowered her blushing face and apologized in a voice like a mosquito.

Wanting to dispel the strange atmosphere, I purposely let out an audible cough, and changed the topic.

“Still, I didn’t really have any time for feeling lonely. For me, rather than going out with friends, Elise is…”

“Elise!? Is that your girlfriend!?”

It was an impressive reaction. Train Girl looked at me with unwavering eyes, as if saying that cheating would not be forgiven.

“N-no. It’s not even a person.”

“Then, is it a pet?”

“…I guess you can say that.”

Actually, Elise was the name of the VR machine that I had. The origin of the name comes from the letters on the back of the machine that read ‘ERII–Z3000T’.

“A pet, huh. I’d like to keep a Zlime or something too… But I feel like if I did that I’d have to spend the whole day taking care of the Zlime, and I’ve heard that if I leave it alone for too long then it’d die of stress… uun.”

She swung her legs back and forth under the table. Her condition was quite serious.

But well, I had a small hunch as to why Train Girl had been forced into such a corner.

–In all likelihood, the reason why Train Girl is unable to make any friends is because of this game's settings.

This world was a strange place where it could neither be called a game nor reality.

While trying to recreate the world to be as realistic as possible, it also tried to adhere to the game's setting.

Whether to be faithful to 'reality' or to be faithful to the 'game', this world was a strange combination of these two ideals colliding with each other.

For the people living in this world, normally they would behave as in 'reality', in that their actions were closer to those of people in the real world rather than the residents of a game. In fact, Reinhart, Train Girl, and even the one we just met, Marielle, had taken actions that they would not have in the game.

But on the other hand, just like in the game, Reinhart had let me ride in the wagon until the town, and Marielle had let me use the confession room. Even Train Girl's monster train event was something so unnatural that it couldn't be passed off as a simple coincidence. It was something that was identical to the 'game'.

In other words, normally the world would behave as if in 'reality', even if it meant ignoring some aspects of the 'game', but when it came to game events, it would, as if there was some sort

of driving force behind it, try to recreate the same situations in the ‘game’, even if that would be slightly removed from ‘reality’.

So, with this in mind, try thinking about Train Girl’s event again.

Within the game, during her monster train event, Train Girl was always by herself, and there had never been any mention of her party members having being done in by the monsters.

What that means is obvious.

In order to recreate the game event, it would be problematic if Train Girl had friends.

So, if my theory is correct…

–Train Girl was born with the fate of being alone, destined to live her whole life as a loner!

I had come up with a bunch of questions to try to confirm this, but for some reason even if it was someone I was able to normally talk to, whenever I mention trying to form a party with Train Girl an unreal amount of static cuts in and the conversation gets nowhere.

“I think I pretty much understand your situation.”

I gave a big nod, and Train Girl looked at me with her face full of expectation.

“Then, then…”

“Mm. …I don’t think I can be of much help.”

“Thank y–eehhhh!?”

It was once again an entertaining reaction.

Still, it wasn't that I didn't want to help Train Girl after coming all this way. As a fellow loner, it was obvious to want to at least help out somewhat.

"Well, think about it. The best option here would probably be to have me assist you in making friends, but I can't do that."

"W-why can't you?"

Huh! Isn't that obvious.

"Because I'm also a loner!"

"Ah, right… um, sorry about that."

Don't apologize! You're just going to make me feel depressed!

"B-but, if you would just become f-f-friends with me, Souma…"

Why are you stuttering so much over the word friends! Just how high is your loner level! While thinking that, I shook my head.

It was possible even within the game for players to form parties with Train Girl, so it was true that it would be simple if I were just to become friends with her.

However, this wouldn't end up fixing the problem at the root. That's because…

"I'm planning to leave this town for the capital in the near future. That's why I won't be able to be around you for that long."

"Then I'll come with you…"

“You know, all the enemies around the capital are at least level 50. Also, if I’m not mistaken, don’t you have to take care of your sick mother? Are you planning to leave your mother behind?”

“Uuu…”

She became an adventurer for the sake of her sick mother. Whether it was for that reason or not, I don’t recall the Train Girl in the game ever leaving the town of Ramlich by her own accord.

If I were to add her to my party, then I would probably have been able to bring her to the capital, but I had no intention of bringing her along if it meant separating her from her sick mother.

“That’s why…”

Looking at Train Girl’s disheartened figure, I declared.

“That’s why, the only thing I can do is to train you until you can stand on your own as a solo adventurer.”

“…Eh?”

Seeing Train Girl with a dumbfounded expression, I repeated it again in simpler terms.

“I’ve been a solo adventurer for a long time, and I know lots of things that others don’t know. You could call me a pro at being a loner. Even if I can’t save you from being a loner, I think I can at

least make you strong enough so that you can go on even as a loner."

"Souma…"

Train Girl looked at me with tears in her eyes. Seeing that, I quickly added.

"O-of course, I won't be teaching you for free. In return, you'll have to teach me about things that I don't know, and help me with a few small experiments, so prepare yourself…"

"Okay! I'll do anything you want! If you want to why don't we start right now!!"

Standing up, Train Girl grabbed my two hands.

As if her earlier dejection was a lie, her eyes sparkled brightly. It was like her joy at finally finding a comrade had overloaded her.

"Ah, it's not anything that urgent…"

I tried to back down from her pressure, but Train Girl wouldn't let me.

"It's okay! I'll try my best, so if you want me to do anything just say so!!"

She was looking at me with glittering eyes. It really did seem like she would do anything.

Well, of course, I had no intention of asking for anything absurd, but jeez, what would you do if I were actually some evil person?

(Guess I have no choice…)

This would probably get out of hand if I don't do something now.

Even though there was no need to do it right away, I had her help me with an experiment which seemed the simplest.

"–Mm, then, can I tie up your arms and legs and have you spend a few hours rolling around in the fields?"

"Huh?"

Part 4.

Now then, today's experiment will test Train Girl's train power, commonly referred to as Train Mode.

The location was the northern plains near the town where the enemies were the weakest.

To start with, the two of us worked together to clear the area of monsters, and then, to ensure that there wasn't any chance of a bad accident happening, I had her put on one of the sets of mythril equipment I had. Then, with her consent, I tied together her wrists and ankles, and the preparation was complete.

"If anything happens then yell loudly."

"…Okay."

Leaving behind the still utterly confused Train Girl, I positioned myself just barely within the range where I would hear her if she yelled.

There were no signs of monsters nearby, yet I could still clearly see the bound Train Girl.

It was the a setup for this experiment.

Around an hour in, there weren't any problems, nor any kind of development.

The tied up Train Girl rolled around out of boredom, and would sometimes inquire from me the current time.

When that happened, I would answer using the watch I had borrowed from Train Girl, but other than that I spent all my time whacking at the torch.

As expected of Master Torch, it quickly regenerated the damage it had taken, and as expected of the game, it didn't spawn new monsters near a player.

This peaceful, uneventful time continued to flow by.

The first sign of change happened about 1 hour and 50 minutes into the experiment.

Having even gotten bored of rolling around, Train Girl had quietly sunk into a slumber in the fields, but her demeanor started becoming increasingly unnatural.

As if unable to stay still, she would start swinging her legs or rolling around, becoming very restless.

Then, at exactly 2 hours since the start of the experiment, an unmistakeable irregularity occurred.

Particles of light gathered some tens of meters from Train Girl, and there, abruptly, Goblins appeared.

“A monster spawn…”

Though it was something I had expected, seeing this absurdly unrealistic scene, I let out a groan.

Monster spawn, or in the case of something that had already been defeated once, a respawn, was the phenomenon controlling the emergence of monsters.

The monsters in fields and dungeons would usually respawn after a fixed time, but normally, players will not witness those moments.

According to the setting, monsters were made from clumps of Elements, in other words magic power, so it wouldn’t be weird for monsters to appear of seemingly nowhere, but it seemed to have been determined that seeing the moment of monsters popping out destroyed the feeling of a fantasy world.

Thus, within Nekomimineko, other than during special events, the spawning of monsters near a player, especially within line of sight, would generally not happen.

However, right now, in front of my eyes was a situation that went against those rules.

On the internet, there had been comments that Train Girl seemed to bring along too many monsters.

Even in areas where all the monsters had been defeated, or in areas where the respawn time was long, she would still manage to appear with a large number of enemies, so it was theorized that during Train Mode, Train Girl had the power to forcibly spawn monsters.

That theory had now, at this very moment, been proven.

However, I quickly realized that it wasn't the time to leisurely think about such things. The Goblins were gleefully approaching Train Girl while licking their lips.

With the level difference and the mythril armor, she should be alright, but in front of me, the situation was becoming like one right before certain scenes in slightly erotic fantasy manga.

(Well, let's quickly save her!)

With that in mind, I started running towards Train Girl, but instead I ended up witnessing something completely unexpected and unbelievable.

"Kyaa, KyAAAaaAAAA!!"

Noticing the Goblins approaching, Train Girl let out a scream,

“You’re kidding me!”

and began escaping by rolling along the ground, while still bound.

What’s more, she was fast! She quickly left the Goblins behind, rolling off into the distance.

But, I can’t say that I blame her.

Goblins were level 5 monsters. Their status values were only barely above that of Zlimes, but their appearance was what gave them the nickname “Beginner’s Wall”. Especially in this world where monsters had become real, they were scary enough to give one trauma.

If I had to give a comparison, they were about as scary as lizardmen. …Ah, sorry, Reinhart.

Anyways, to see something like that suddenly appear out of nowhere, it’s no surprise that Train Girl was startled.

“Wait! Wait up!”

However, she was escaping towards a bad direction. For some reason, Train Girl was rolling at full speed away from both the town and me.

“How can she be so fast even when rolling?!”

Of course, it wasn’t enough to lose me, but it was an abnormal speed.

It could be that she had received a speed boost for entering Train Mode.

(I thought that if I bound her, then even if she was to enter Train Mode she wouldn't be able to move, but maybe it had the opposite effect? I shouldn't have been so careless with this!)

I started regretting this, but what's past is past. Actually, even if she wasn't bound she might have still panicked, and if that happened she would be running away at an even faster speed.

It wasn't the time to debate what-ifs. Either way, I must catch up.

(Damn, this is annoying!)

What's even more troublesome was that as Train Girl kept rolling, small fries kept appearing from nearby. It would seem that her power to forcibly spawn monsters during Train Mode applied even while she was rolling. The number of monsters that she dragged along quickly increased.

"If this keeps going… huh?"

Just as I was beginning to feel anxious, all of a sudden Train Girl's movements started becoming dull. Her body that had been able to produce that much speed suddenly became sluggish.

I quickly realized what was happening.

"Of course, if you roll around that much, you'd get dizzy."

Rather, it was a miracle that she had been able to last until now. I wonder if she has a strong inner ear.

Anyways, with this the situation had become a lot simpler.

While ugly and intimidating, Goblins were slow. The weakest of the weak, Zlimes and She-Zlimes, didn't even need to be mentioned.

I quickly blew past them and picked up Train Girl in my arms.

It probably would've been fine to fight, but I didn't really want to do so while holding the groggy Train Girl. So, instead, I chose to escape.

Even though I was carrying a person, unless it was a fast monster like a Mad Hound, something like a Goblin could never hope to catch me. I quickly pulled away from the monsters chasing after us.

While being carried by me, new monsters had not spawned around Train Girl. It seemed that her Train Mode only had effect when she was alone after all.

"We should be okay here."

Seeing that the monsters chasing us had become pea-sized dots, I called out to Train Girl.

"Heyy Train Girl, are you awake? Are you okay?"

Hearing my voice, Train Girl's eyes snapped open.

"H-huh? W-wh… Ehhh!?"

Right after coming to, she gave a nice reaction. With a bitter chuckle, I let her onto the ground and cut the ropes.

“Sorry for having you help with something like this. I guess I should’ve probably told you what was going to happen ahead of time.”

“N-no, thats… Souma!!”

Hearing a sudden urgency in her voice, I turned to look.

“Geh!”

The monsters that I had thought we had shaken off had persistently chased us here.

It would seem that once a monster encounters Train Girl in her Train Mode, it will not change targets. It really was a system with bad taste.

If it’s like this, I have no choice.

“Sorry, let me carry you.”

“Eh, ah!”

I once again picked up Train Girl who seemed to still have not recovered her strength yet.

“U-umm, I can…”

“It’s fine! This is part of the experiment!”

Train Girl tried to refuse, but I forcibly convinced her.

(Still, this is making me quite nervous.)

At times like these, I really admired the denseness of harem manga protagonists.

They would be able to smoothly carry a girl in their arms without noticing that as a result the girl had fallen for them, but actually doing something like this felt quite embarrassing.

It was different a moment ago when she was barely conscious, but right now when the situation wasn't even all that pressing, I became really mindful of the fact that I was touching a girl.

That said, this wasn't quite the place to be having a drawn-out love comedy moment either.

"I'll be running past the monsters, so hold on tight!"

Saying that, I started to return along the path that we had come from.

Fortunately Train Girl didn't take too long to be knocked out by dizziness, so the number of monsters that she had pulled wasn't all that numerous. Cutting diagonally, I managed to pass by the Goblins at the front.

The Zlimes remaining in the rear were simple matters. The difference in speed was just too immense, there wasn't even need to pay them any attention. Without much effort I ran past the group of monsters. Backtracking our path, I ran until the entrance of the town.

The moment we took one step into the town, the monsters scattered, as if losing all interest in us, returning back to their respective areas.

(Phew, Train Mode still behaved the same as in the game.)

The effects of Train Mode were dispelled when escaping into a safe area like the town. Normally, one would be caught by the mob before they could reach the town, so this technique wasn't all that useful, but luckily the enemies this time were all slow.

"With this, we should be fine. …Are you okay?"

I asked, and Train Girl gave a spirited nod.

"Y-yes. I'm fine. Um, I'm sorry for freaking out, but I was just so shocked…"

"No, don't worry about that…"

Could it be because of the whole running away while being carried thing?

Both of us were acting quite awkwardly.

"Uhm, could I ask a question?"

"Y-yeah, of course."

With a much more concerned look in her eyes than I had expected, Train Girl looked at me.

I'm sure her question was going to be about the spawning monsters. That was certainly an abnormal occurrence. If it's not that then it'd be about when we were running from the

Goblins… or so I tried to prepare myself, but the question that she asked was neither of those.

“D-did I manage to help you, Souma?”

“Eh?”

Her words were so unexpected that I was at a lost of what to say. I’m not sure how she interpreted my reaction, but Train Girl desperately tried again.

“S-since a lot of weird stuff happened, and I ended up panicking and suddenly running away, so I was worried if maybe your experiment didn’t end up going so well or something…”

Feeling Train Girl’s anxiousness, I understood.

Rather than the abnormalities that had just occurred, or how unreasonably she was treated, or even the circumstances around the time we were escaping from the monsters, what was more important to Train Girl was the first companion she had made, whether they had successfully completed their objective, and whether she had been of any help to them.

I hoped that, as long as I was here, she would slowly become more confident in herself.

With those wishes in mind, I answered with an even bigger nod.

“You were a great help. I couldn’t have done that experiment without you.”

“I-is that true!?”

Hearing my words, it was like Train Girl's face went into full bloom. Her face made a complete change from a downcast expression into one radiating with energy, as she tightly gripped my two hands.

"T-then, I don't care if it's an experiment or something else, please let me know if there's anything I can help with! If it's something I can do, I'll do anything!!"

While laughing wryly at her enthusiasm, I replied cheerfully, as if answering Train Girl's impatience.

"Sure, then let's try bungee jumping without a rope!"

"Huh?"

Kids, this is how you recycle a joke.

Part 5.

The experiment on the plains has cleared up the specifics of Train Mode quite a bit.

I planned on trying something new using those results as a base, but for that we needed to venture into a high-level area. However, doing so without any preparation would only be suicide.

For the time being, Train Girl and I decided to visit the town's item shop and gather some essentials items.

"Ohh, isn't this…"

The first thing that caught my eye was the Status Sticker.

It was an item that displayed the name and level of whatever it was stuck to, and quite frankly a completely useless garbage item in the game, but in this world where the menu couldn't be opened it seemed like it would be quite useful.

Not to mention that it was marked at a mere 10E. Quite an economical price.

Even though it had nothing to do with the upcoming experiment, I bought 10 or so and, after getting permission from the clerk, tried using one on myself.

"Oooh!"

On the piece of paper stuck to my arm, words quickly formed.

[Souma Sagara: LV 13]

It seemed that I was only level 13. I had fought for quite a bit at the Plateau of Sealing, but even with the level difference, I guess I couldn't expect to gain too many levels from just killing small fries for an hour or two.

In which case, it was quite likely that Train Mode would be the key to leveling up safely and efficiently. My anticipation for the upcoming experiment grew even more.

Still, what surprised me the most from looking at the Status Sticker was the name.

I hadn't told anyone my full name since coming to this world, but even then the system had recognized me.

"Souma, what are you doing? Gems are over here."

As I was looking at the Status Sticker, Train Girl, accompanying me, sent a puzzled look.

(Whoops, that was dangerous.)

It was probably a good idea to keep the fact that I was level 13 hidden.

I stuffed the rest of the Status Stickers in my bag, and trotted over to Train Girl.

Browsing around the shop, in addition to the Status Sticker, I also bought the items that were the purpose of this trip: magic gems, darts, and emergency recovery potions, and on the way I also picked up a pocket watch and a shovel.

The gems and darts were for the experiments, the pocket watch was for myself, and the shovel was to give to the inn owner.

But man, I didn't expect to find pocket watches and shovels in this shop.

It did feel like they carried more random things than in the game… Now that I took a closer look, rather than an item shop it was more like the town's general shop.

Either way, we were done with our preparations.

Honestly I would've wanted to take a look at the accessory shop and weapon shop nearby as well, but I should be prioritizing Train Girl right now. Holding it in, we left the town.

Our destination was northeast. The setting of our next experiment will be what was widely called “Nekomimineko’s premier ghost dungeon”, The Cave of Trials.

The Cave of Trials was a dungeon near Ramlich where unusually high-leveled monsters appeared. Their levels were said to be over 70.

It contained no events or treasures, and its monsters were all knights made of empty suits of armor, called Armor Knights.

Armor Knights didn’t move that fast, but they were strong and sturdy, and extremely hard to defeat. But in return, they boasted an exceptional experience multiplier rate.

Thus, while being a challenge for players, it also offered a great chance for growth. This was indeed a tough dungeon that, when overcome, granted players a large development in their abilities.

It was indeed, a cave of trials.

Or, that is what it should have been…

“Uhm, is this really the right place? This dungeon is pretty famous for having nothing at all inside…”

In reality, this Cave of Trials did not contribute to players’ development at all.

Calling this a “ghost dungeon” was also out of sarcasm, since because of some slight miscalculations in the setting, whenever one arrived at the area pretty much all of the monsters were dead. What’s more, the respawn time for the monsters in this

dungeon was the longest out of all of the monsters in the game at 255 hours. Nobody would want to wait over 10 days here, so people gave up trying to find any mobs here.

That said, now, I had Train Girl with me. Choosing my words carefully, I started to explain.

“That’s why it’s an experiment. Uhh, actually I’ve heard that when certain conditions are met then monsters start appearing. So, I wanted to test if that was true…”

If Train Girl were to find out that she had the power to call forth monsters, she would probably be really depressed.

It hurts me to have to keep lying to her, but I continued my explanation while skirting around that fact.

But well, leave it to Training Girl to accept it all without a shred of doubt, as she bought into the plan, eyes glowing, with unexpected interest.

“Ah, so that was why those Goblins suddenly appeared in those plains! Souma, that’s amazing! Is it be some kind of hidden knowledge passed down only to Protectors of Seals?!”

“…Uhm, can you please forget that title.”

Why does this girl keep digging up my dark history! Though I did bring it on myself…

While facepalming, I continued.

“Anyways, since the experiment in the plains was a success, I wanted to test it with the enemies here too.”

“Ahh, I get it! This time, instead of a field, you want to test it in a dungeon right?! This feels kinda exciting!”

While trying to calm down Train Girl, I explained the plan.

The dungeon should be empty to begin with, so should be able to just stroll into it. Then, if we wait 2 hours, Train Mode should activate.

“If my hypothesis is correct, at that time enemies should start appearing. They’re strong, but slow. You should be able to run from them with your speed. I want you to run deeper into the back of the dungeon, and if possible, try to hit each enemy once with a dart.”

“I see, so you want me to count the number of monsters with darts.”

A dart is an offensive item. It deals a fixed 1 damage to an enemy, no matter what kind of enemy, so against tough enemies like metal-type enemies it becomes a trump card, and when many of the same enemies appear it can also be used as a marker. For this experiment, I had bought 50 of them.

“But don’t focus too much on trying to hit the darts. Your opponents are over level 70. You should prioritize running away, and everything else is only if you find a chance.”

“Roger!”

It was quite a spirited response, but I was still slightly worried.

The enemies were over level 70, and even compared with other enemies of the same level it has higher attack. Though I had lent Train Girl some mythril armor, in the end it was still equipment sold in a shop in Ramlich. It was definitely insufficient when dealing with Armor Knights.

I ended up voicing my concerns. I had started to think that maybe it was better to not do this after all.

“To tell the truth, the experiment this time is quite dangerous. If you don’t want to…”

“I’ll do it. There’s a big level gap, but I’ve fought an Armor Knight before. If I only need to run away, that’s a piece of cake!”

“But still…”

On the other hand, Train Girl was the one full of motivation. As I became more reluctant, she looked me straight in the eyes and said,

“I mean, this is something that needs to be done, right?”

Hearing those words, just for a moment, I forgot to breathe.

“…Yeah. It needs to be done.”

I gave in and nodded, and, seeing that, Train Girl smiled.

“Then, I’ll do my best. …For Souma’s sake.”

I thought about correcting her words, but decided against it.

There’s no need to pour cold water on her determination.

“This Cave of Trials is shaped like a donut. The entrance, which is where we are, is connected to the deepest part of the cave. That’s why, if you keep going forward… you’ll come out there.”

Saying that, I pointed towards the top of the cliff in front of us.

It was hard to tell just how tall the cliff was. From where we were standing, one could only roughly tell where the top was.

“At that time, it’ll all come down to this.”

I took out a gem containing a magic called Featherfall.

It was only for a single use, but it was possible to activate the magic imbued into the gem.

Featherfall was a magic that decreased the user’s fall speed. Within the span of one minute, the user’s weight becomes as light as a bird’s feather, lessening both the speed and the impact of falling. I had already passed an identical gem to Train Girl.

“Descending the cliff makes the return trip a lot simpler. While escaping from the monsters, use that when you reach the top of the cliff and jump down. Then, meet back here where I’ll be waiting, and the experiment will be a success.”

“Got it!”

As always, her replies were very energetic, but I still felt uneasy.

“Are you sure? You do know how to use the gem right? You won’t try to jump down without using it or something?”

Towards my questions, Train Girl replied with a smile.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll be okay. Rather, it’d be impossible to jump down such a tall cliff without thinking.”

She herself did not seem too fazed by the task. Maybe I’m worrying too much.

After going over the key points once more, passing her the recovery items that we just bought, and telling her not to overdo it, finally, it was time.

“Well then, here I go!”

“Mm. Take care.”

Watching her gallantly walk away, I still couldn’t soothe the anxiety within me.

I passed the next two hours restlessly.

Actually, experiments to use Train Girl in order to revive the enemies in this dungeon had already been tried before in the game. Many ways of using Train Girl for leveling had been tested, and it was found that if one stuck around in this dungeon, Train Girl did indeed appear.

However, unfortunately, those experiments did not attain favorable results.

–That was because, almost every single time while pulling the monsters, Train Girl would fall off the cliff to her death.

Of course, that was the NPC Train Girl from within the game, but since it happened in the game, there's no guarantee that it won't happen here too.

That was exactly the reason why I went and prepared two magic gems.

(If worst comes to worst, I'll use Featherfall myself!)

I've never tried casting magic on a falling person, but it should be fine. I was accustomed to targeting fast moving things in the game.

Even in the worst case, I did not intend to fail.

Finally, the watch's minute hand had made two full revolutions.

(It should be soon, I think?)

I waited, bracing myself for Train Girl to come falling any moment.

It was around ten minutes later. Just when my anxiety had reached its peak, and I had started wondering if something had happened…

"Soumaaaaaaaaa!!"

I looked up towards the voice, and spotted Train Girl. Due to the distance she was only as big as a pea, but the figure who jumped off the cliff in order to shake off the shadows chasing could only be her.

The moment that her body lept off the ground, even though it was according to plan, my heart still skipped a beat. The scene of Train Girl, caught by gravity and mercilessly slammed onto the ground resurfaced in my mind.

With the possibility of the worst conclusion in mind, I unconsciously squeezed the gem in my hand.

However…

(I guess I didn't need to worry that much.)

My imaginations did not become reality. Train Girl's body was slowly floating downwards. It seemed that she had properly used Featherfall.

"Souma, I did it!"

She was waving her hands as she headed towards the ground, and, as I was waving back to her, I noticed something.

"Behind you!!"

I yelled, but, it wasn't in time.

"Eh?"

By the time Train Girl had looked back, it was already too late.

One of the Armor Knights that jumped off the cliff chasing her had by coincidence ended up falling close to her.

The spear of the falling Armor Knight, struck her!

"__!"

Letting out a silent scream, Train Girl's body twisted in pain.

With that strike from the spear, and possibly also because of Featherfall making her lighter, she was blown sideways with an amazing force.

“Ugh!”

She was already close to the ground. I immediately started activated skills.

Closing the gap with rapid cancel dash, I caught her before she fell to the ground. It must be because of the magic, but her body was as light as a feather.

For some reason, that just served to fan my agitation.

“! That’s right, recovery items!”

Unseemingly, I seemed to have been dazed for a moment. But I quickly came back to my senses, and retrieved a recovery potion from my pouch.

There was no time to do something as slow as having her drink it, so, hesitating only briefly, I smashed the potion against her body.

There was a lighting effect, and a slightly delayed sound effect.

Her HP had recovered. At least, it should have.

“Hey, are you okay!? Answer me!!”

But, she didn’t reply when I called to her. I became flustered.

(You gotta be kidding me! How could this…!)

I hastily took out another recovery potion from the pouch, and as I was about to throw it…

“I’m, okay.”

A small hand stopped me.

Lowering my gaze, I saw that Train Girl had opened her eyes and was looking this way.

Her complexion was also not that bad. It didn’t seem like she was going to just off and die like this.

“…Haaa.”

This might’ve been the most terrifying thing that I’ve experienced since coming to this world.

I let out a huge breath. There was a lot that I wanted to say and ask, but it would be troublesome if another Armor Knight were to come falling down from above.

Completely ignoring the thundering noises coming from behind, I picked her up in the princess carry that had already become familiar to me, and quickly left the area.

Since then, I had tried to use more recovery potions on her, but Train Girl had stubbornly rejected it, saying that it’d be a waste.

“Ah, hey!”

Not only that, but ignoring my protests, she even slipped out from my arms to stand on the ground with her own two feet. Facing me, she proudly smiled.

“At the very end, I was a bit careless, but still, I did it.”

In that way, she asked me like a small dog waiting for a reward from its owner.

“Souma, was I useful?”

“You…”

Hearing those words, I was dumbfounded.

After being made to do something as unreasonable as charging into a high level dungeon alone, and even actually ending up almost dead, she still did not doubt me one bit, and genuinely only cared whether she was of use to me.

I can’t believe her. While thinking that, I also felt glad from the bottom of my heart that I had brought Train Girl here.

“Um, s-so?”

Her inquiring eyes contained a slight amount of nervousness, but above that, it shone with anticipation. She must be overjoyed at being useful for her comrades. Just by looking at her one can tell that she was waiting to be told “you were useful”.

…However, for this particular time, I was unable to respond to those expectations.

Slowly, I shook my head from side to side.

“Sorry, but this experiment was actually not for my sake.”

“…Eh?”

She froze on hearing those unexpected words, as I then proceeded to stick a small piece of paper on her arm.

I then waited for words to appear on that piece of paper, and said,

“Congratulations on leveling up.”

On the piece of paper that I had stuck on the stunned Train Girl was, simply,

[Ina Traille: LV 57]

As of this day, Train Girl had graduated from being a beginner adventurer.

Part 6.

“Sweeter than Garbodor’s Maple Honey Pudding, more unfortunate than the Armor Knights of the Cave of Trials.”

Such goes this phrase born from Nekomimineko, but for other than the people who had played Nekomimineko, its nuance probably wouldn’t be understood. In order to fully comprehend this, one would need to start with The Tragedy of the Knights of the Cave of Trials.

Even within VR games, there were cases of players slipping and falling to their deaths in fields surrounded by sharp cliffs.

However, stories of monsters randomly falling out of the field and dying were rarely heard of.

What was the reason for that?

I don't know about other games, but at least in Nekomimineko the reason was simple.

They just didn't allow monsters to go near places where they might fall off. Through this one simple countermeasure, Nekomimineko prevented the monsters from falling to their deaths.

Not counting when under status effects or when chasing players, normally the monsters in Nekomimineko each stayed within a prespecified area, never wandering out of their region. As long as the location underneath a cliff was not also contained within its movement area, monsters wouldn't approach the cliff, and there would be no need to worry about them falling.

…But who would have thought that there was indeed a dungeon which had such a thing.

Of course, I'm talking about the Cave of Trials, and this was exactly the reason why this Cave of Trials came to be called a "ghost dungeon".

The Cave of Trials was a ring shaped dungeon, and its monsters had the whole dungeon marked as their movement area, as they moved around a circular patrol routine.

In other words, the Armor Knights in the cave spent their time circling the entirety of this dungeon.

Though the ground-based AI movement routines could deal with gradual hills, they couldn't deal with sudden changes in elevation like stairs.

Normally that would be fine. Any half-decent game designer wouldn't put stairs or such in the patrol routes of such monsters, and there wouldn't be any problems.

But, since this Cave of Trials was ring shaped, the entrance and exit of the dungeon were connected. This meant that the movement area above the cliff was connected with that below the cliff, and monsters would try to walk between the two.

The case where they try to walk from the bottom of the cliff to the top of the cliff was still okay. They would just crash into the wall, unable to proceed, and thus turn around and continue on their merry way.

However, what if they tried to walk from the top of the cliff to the bottom of the cliff?

Ground-based AIs have no concept of height. The poor Armor Knights would, since it was within their movement area, take a step off the cliff intending to walk on as normal, and by that time nothing could stop them from falling.

When falling from a high place, the fall damage was determined based on the height of the drop as well as the weight of the character. The cliff was tens of meters high, so there was no

chance that the heavyweight class of Armor Knights that fell down with no preparation would be able to survive.

What's more, the Armor Knights were the type that would patrol the entirety of their domain.

It was random where they decided to go, but since this was a dungeon with only a single path, sooner or later they would arrive at the cliff. The only difference was whether it was sooner or later, but in the end, each Armor Knight would *definitely* fall off the cliff to their death.

That's why, no more than one or two days after the start of the game, the knights in the dungeon will have all perished.

This was the truth behind the "ghost dungeon" where even when a player comes there are no monsters.

–This was indeed prime Nekomimineko quality!!

Even then, it was unexpectedly not possible to take advantage of this bug.

You don't get any experience from a monster just falling to its death, and even drop items disappear after a while.

Not to mention that the respawn time was 255 hours, while they would die within at most 48 hours, so sitting there and waiting wasn't very efficient.

That was where Train Girl came in.

With the existence of Train Girl, there was no need to wait out the long respawn times. Just from having Train Girl in Train Mode pass through, the Armor Knights would revive.

In addition, we already knew that as long as she stayed within the dungeon, the monsters will continue to chase after Train Girl.

The plan was to then gather up a bunch of monsters, and, after jumping off the cliff and returning to the entrance of the dungeon, just by waiting around the revived monsters would all throw themselves down the cliff.

However, with just that, the only thing that would be accomplished is wiping out all of the revived monsters, and their experience points would be completely wasted. That's why we used these: darts.

Since version 1.28, "in cases where monsters are killed due to damage from status effects or environmental damage, all experience goes to the character that landed the last attack" had been added.

This was due to one of the earliest Nekomimineko players, a slightly crazy poison user, continuously pestering the development company, who finally gave in and changed it.

It must've been some extreme pestering. When the patch notice came out, surprisingly, for once, many comments sympathetic to the development company had been posted.

Though unfortunate for the customer service representatives of the development company, because of this training at the Cave of Trials had become a possibility.

Darts inflicted a fixed 1 damage to no matter what enemy they hit.

The level 70 Armor Knights had high defense, but by attacking with darts even Train Girl could damage them. Then, by making them jump off the cliff and fall to their deaths later, the character who had attacked them last, in other words Train Girl, would receive all of the experience.

As expected of a slow respawning yet powerful monster. Even taking into account the 2 hours of preparation, to gain over 30 levels within merely some tens of minutes was unheard of.

What's more, there was one other benefit than just the levels…

"Souma! I've finished gathering up all the items!"

It was possible to collect all of the drop items from the revived Armor Knights. Drop items were generally better than the items sold in shops. The grade of these items could be said to be top-class for the early game, or maybe they could even be called lower-tier mid game items.

"Okay, then Train Girl…"

"U-uhm, I've been wondering about this for a while, but why are you calling me 'Train Girl'?"

“Ah, that’s um… a nickname. See, you’re Ina Traille, so, Train Girl, right? It just felt easier to call you like that, so…”

“N-nickname…!”

Train Girl shook vigorously. Maybe it was a bad idea to have called her Train Girl out loud, or so I thought, but that was not the case.

“I-it’s the first time someone has called me by a nickname before! Train Girl is kinda, kinda cool isn’t it!!”

She was overjoyed. Based on the results, you could say that it was a really bad idea.

“Ah, then you should have a nickname too, Souma…”

“I don’t need one!”

Since the incident in the cave, Train Girl’s affection levels had been growing rapidly.

(…Jeez.)

I mean I did say that I would help her, and I wasn’t lying when I said that, but I also wasn’t lying when I said that I won’t be able to be with her for very long.

If she grows any more attached to me, it would be quite inconvenient. I had better cool her down a bit for now.

“Then, instead of a nickname, call me Master Souma…”

“Yes, Master Souma!”

It was an instant response. She had no reservation at all with calling me master. It was a complete failure.

“Sorry, that was a joke.”

I quickly withdrew my words. To be called master in front of people couldn’t be anything but a punishment.

“Anyways, I’ll be calling you Train Girl from now on, so just call me Souma or whatever you like.”

“Yes, Master Souma!”

I involuntarily scowled.

Was she doing this to annoy me? No, unfortunately her eyes were serious.

“Just call me Souma or whatever you like.”

“Yes, Souma…”

She seemed slightly let down. Was she that into calling me master?

(How did it become like this…)

Prioritizing her training was half out of benevolence. The other half was that fulfilling my promise ahead of time would let me bid goodbye whenever, in a sense like getting the troublesome things out of the way, but I felt like it had completely backfired.

“Is something wrong?”

Train Girl cheerfully called out to me, as I shook my head.

“Nothing. Well then, now that we’ve collected the items, let’s return to town for now.”

“Okay!!”

Silently sighing at her overly lively response, I returned to town, with Train Girl trailing right behind me like a baby spot-billed duck.

Extra.

Extracts from NekomiminekoWiki ››› “Common Bugs FAQ”

Q: I put in a lot of effort killing Wild Silver Zlimes since I was told by NPCs that they gave a lot of EXP, but I’m not leveling up at all. Is this a bug?

A: It’s a bug. Due to a mistake, the experience granted by Wild Silver Zlimes and Berserk Rabbits had been switched. Go search for and hunt Berserk Rabbits instead.

Q: The healer in my party is not leveling up at all. Is this a bug?

A: It… would be great if it was a bug, but it is how the game is. In this game no matter how many times one casts healing magic, they would receive no experience. Either try to find a new, higher leveled healer, or try your best to let them deal the final blow.

Q: The healer in my party leveled up, but their recovery magic did not become any stronger. Is this a bug?

A: It’s… not a bug, but how the system works. When leveling the healer, if they dealt the final blow with a physical attack, then

even if their class is healer, their physical statuses are what will increase. Either try to deal the final blow with magic, or give up and treat healers as consumable items.

Q: A certain magician joined our party, but doesn't listen to commands and goes berserk, and even burns other party members with offensive magic. Is this a bug?
A: The existence of that character is something like a bug.

Chapter 4 – Miss Heroine.

Part 1.

"Now then, I'll teach you how to explore a dungeon solo!"

In just a few hours, Train Girl had leveled up to level 57, but Nekomimineko wasn't the type of game that you could beat just by having a high level.

Until I leave for the capital, I must pass on the methods of surviving in this world to Train Girl, and raise her into a first rate Nekomimineko player, I mean, first rate adventurer. That was why, right after having leveled up, we refilled our items in town, and immediately headed towards a different dungeon, but…

"W-wait a moment!"

As I was about to step into the dungeon, Train Girl hurriedly stopped me.

On the way she was all cheery like, “It’s my first time going to a dungeon together with someone!”, what a quick change in attitude.

“A-are you really planning on challenging this dungeon, with just the two of us?”

Where we arrived at was the dungeon, The Black Mine, where enemies averaged level 40. There wasn’t too much in the sense of variety, but this was a place filled with peculiar monsters.

“What are you talking about? Of course not.”

“Haha, of course.”

With my response, Train Girl appeared to be relieved,

“I said we’re doing solo adventuring training. So you’re going to try your best at this, alone of course.”

but with the continuation of my words her eyes opened wide, and she complained loudly.

“N-no way! This dungeon is said to be an especially hard dungeon within the dungeons of Ramlich! I heard that even a level 50 party had been sent running right away…”

“Isn’t that exactly why it’s worth a challenge?”

At the very least, Train Girl was level 57. Even if she messes up, she wouldn’t die immediately.

Shaking off Train Girl’s protests, I was once again about to step into the dungeon, when I suddenly turned around.

“Oh, right. I forgot to tell you earlier, but please take off the mythril armor and change back into what you had before entering the dungeon.”

“Ehhh!!”

With Train Girl’s wail, the curtains opened on today’s second dungeon exploration.

After hesitantly changing her equipment, Train Girl caught up to me.

Even then, she fearfully tried to change my mind with a wavering voice.

“S-Souma, it really is dangerous here! Together with the Skeleton Knight whose defense is like an iron wall, there’s the fast and powerful Dark Wolfman. The monsters here are so strong that the EXP isn’t even worth it…”

“It’s okay, don’t worry.”

I replied lightheartedly, and headed further and further in along the narrow passageway. Before long, a small chamber of space appeared in front of us.

“…It’s there.”

“Y-you don’t mean–”

“Shhh!”

I covered Train Girl’s mouth before she could say any more.

“Don’t say a word from here on. I’ll go ahead, come when I give the signal.”

Confirming that Train Girl nodded her head, I carefully advanced.

What was there was indeed the skeletal warrior equipped with sword and shield, the level 42 Skeleton Knight.

Seeing that, I brazenly walked in front of it.

“—!!”

I saw Train Girl let out a silent scream from the corner of my eye. Even now she was waving her arms with a frantic expression trying to stop me, but I made a gesture for her to stay silent, and casually came to a stop in front of the Skeleton Knight. …There was no reaction.

I raised a single hand in the air, as if saying, “Hey there”. …There was no reaction.

I gave a little twirl in front of that body made of bones. …There was still no reaction.

Picking up my courage, I tried waving my hand in front of its sunken white face. …Even then, there was no reaction.

(Alright!)

It seems like the rules of the game were effective here as well. I beckoned to Train Girl, and she gingerly edged to my side. …As expected, the Skeleton Knight gave no reaction.

Having Train Girl, scared to the verge of tears, wait on standby, I took out a single gem from my pouch.

The magic that it contained was Firewall. It was magic that conjured up a small wall of flames for a period of time.

I threw that gem towards the other side of the skeleton. Landing on the ground, the gem's magic activated, and a crackling wall of flames appeared.

As that happened, the Skeleton Knight which had shown no reaction whatsoever until now suddenly started to move.

With unsteady steps, it headed towards the wall of flames, and stopped right in front of the fire. It was as if the Skeleton Knight was just staring at the burning flames.

I pointed at the back of the Skeleton Knight's defenseless head to Train Girl, who had been watching this with a dumbfounded expression. She was probably not even thinking anymore at this point, as Train Girl followed my directions and hit the Skeleton Knight on the head with her dagger. …Still, the Skeleton Knight watched the flames.

Like this, Train Girl landed a second hit, then a third hit with her dagger on the skeleton's skull, and finally the pitiable Skeleton Knight lost all of its HP and collapsed, quickly disappearing.

Train Girl was frozen in the posture right after dealing the killing blow. I walked over and patted her on the shoulder.

"Train Girl, you did it!"

“Eh? Um, ehh? I, did it?”

Even though she had defeated the powerful Skeleton Knight, for some reason Train Girl was still stupefied, unable to give but an absent-minded reply.

“Many skeleton type monsters rely only on sound to find their prey.”

Walking along a narrow passageway once again, I gave Train Girl a briefing.

“That’s why if you wear cloth or leather equipment which doesn’t make much sound, it’s easy to approach and gain the initiative, and since undeads don’t react to damage, if you place something noisy nearby then they won’t notice anything until they are already defeated. That said, there aren’t that many monsters that rely only on sound, and as soon as you are targetted, as in discovered by them, then even if you are silent they will still chase after you, so this can only be used from the very start.”

“I understand the logic now, but to not notice anything until they have already been defeated is a bit…”

It seemed that Train Girl was still not fully convinced.

But, this was Nekomimineko, where such absurd situations are passed off as normal. There was no choice but to just accept it.

Train Girl brooded over this for a while, but then it seemed like she noticed something important.

“Huh? But Dark Wolfman isn’t a skeleton type monster. Can it still be defeated using this method?”

I replied to that question with a smile.

“Of course not. If you tried something like that you’d get beaten to a pulp.”

In contrast to my smile, Train Girl’s expression stiffened, and just then,

“…Ooh. Speak of the devil, or I guess wolfman.”

From within the passageway, the figures of three beastmen appeared.

…Dark Wolfman. As their name indicated, they were all super buff wolfmen one size larger than humans. Marching down that narrow passageway, the sight of them gave off quite the pressure.

“Dark Wolfman, and three of them… Let’s run away, Souma!”

Towards Train Girl who was desperately tugging on my sleeves with a pale face, I shook my head.

“It’s too late, we’ve already been seen. They’re faster than us.”

For just a moment, a hopeless look appeared on Train Girl’s face, but she quickly forced it back with strong willpower and stepped out in front of me.

“I-I’ll buy some time! So during that time, at least Souma should… Ahh!”

Having a heroic resolve was good and all, but this was not the right time for it. I pulled Train Girl down to the ground from behind her.

“No matter what happens, stay still and don’t stand up.”

With that warning, I moved forward. By myself, I moved towards the three Dark Wolfmen.

Focusing on their prey, the wolfmen’s eyes locked onto me.

“Souma, don’t! Run away! Ru–”

As Train Girl’s woeful scream echoed, I took yet another step forward, and the wolfmen charged at me. Right before they reached me,

“–n, aw… eh?”

I threw myself onto the ground.

“–Gaaooooooo!!”

The Dark Wolfmen howled.

One unleashed an ultra-fast roundhouse kick. The blow, encompassing a frightening speed and power, audibly sliced through the air… above my head.

Seeing that their first attack missed, the Wolfmen quickly readied a follow-up.

The next strike to be unleashed was a slice with the dominant arm. Those claws that looked as if they would easily tear through any armor swung by with exceptional speed… above my head.

Even then, their stream of attacks did not end. With the blood of beasts flowing through them, the weapons of the wolfmen were not limited to just their solid arms and legs.

“Graaa!!”

With a roar filled only of belligerence, the wolfmen opened their pitch black jaws and lunged forward with an unbelievable speed. Moments later, those sharp teeth chomped closed… naturally, above my head.

“…As you see, about a third of the melee-only monsters don’t have any ground attacks. This is especially common in tall, weaponless monsters like beastmen, so if you’re ever forced into a corner, it could be a good idea to just try lying down.”

As the three Wolfmen milled about above my head, I gave Train Girl an explanation while crawling along the ground like a bug.

“H-how can you be calmly explaining things at a time like this! N-no matter how you look at it this is strange, isn’t it! Why aren’t they attacking us!? Are they idiots!!?”

“Like I said, beastmen types…”

“I understand all that! I understand, but…!!”

Just unable to come to terms with this situation, Train Girl writhed around in frustration.

During the fights in the Plateau of Sealing, I had already confirmed that the monster's attack animations and movement patterns had not changed from when this was a game.

It was weird that the breadth of fighting patterns increased in human characters, but it could have been that monsters' movement abilities had been deemed to be from the result of something similar to what humans called skills.

No matter the reason, the fighting techniques from the game carried over here too. Towards the still unsatisfied Train Girl, I gave my next instruction.

"Well then, hurry and clean up these monsters."

"Eh!? But, I can't possibly fight them head on when it's one versus three!"

Hearing Train Girl say something so stupid with a serious expression even while crawling on the ground, I turned a blank look towards her.

"Obviously, you keep lying on the ground and just slice their legs."

With my words, for some reason Train Girl collapsed.

Having defeated the three Dark Wolfmen spectacularly, we continued deeper into the dungeon.

“This is all wrong. The kind of adventure I had imagined isn’t something like this…”

To the muttering Train Girl, I cautioned her to be quiet.

“More Skeleton Knights. There’s two in the next room.”

Train Girl hurriedly closed her mouth, but curiosity seemed to still have gotten the better of her, as she inquired in a small voice.

“U-uhm, how could you tell?”

“From their footsteps.”

“Footsteps…?”

I explained to the confused Train Girl.

“In dungeons like this, footsteps tend to echo, so you can immediately tell if an enemy is approaching. Being able to grasp the direction and distance from its volume is one of the essential skills a solo adventurer must master.”

Just as an aside, the way Nekomimineko handled sound was quite frivolous, so there were only a few footstep patterns for monsters, and it was even possible to hear footsteps from the other side of a wall. A trained Nekomimineko player could even use footsteps as a radar for enemy positions.

Other than this, there was also an advanced method of using the lag in viewport changes as you shake your head in order to determine enemy positions, but let’s not get too off topic.

“Of course, I also knew earlier from their footsteps that three Dark Wolfmen were about to come.”

“Ohhh. Wait, tell me that earli–Mmf!!”

I covered Train Girl’s mouth as she was about to shout. Train Girl glared at me bitterly, but even as I slowly removed my hand, she did not continue to shout. Instead, in a suppressed voice, she said,

“There’s Skeleton Knights in front of us, right? Then, what if we turned at the last intersection?”

I replied with a choice.

“Silent sneaking or crawling, which do you prefer?”

Within the dungeon, there were skeleton-types other than Skeleton Knights, and demi-humans other than Dark Wolfmen, but the basic strategy was the same. After innumerable stealth attacks and countless instances of crawling, we arrived at the deepest part of the cave.

“That’s, a…”

Seeing the treasure chest enshrined in the back, Train Girl’s voice shook with excitement.

This dungeon contained neither a boss, nor did it provide any event item drops, but in the deepest part there was a single treasure chest, containing a rather high-leveled item for being near Ramlich.

“Well, here’s your final job. Go open that.”

“You want me to open that? But…”

She was trying to exercise restraint, but the whole time, she kept stealing glimpses at the treasure chest, and her two arms could not stay still, repeatedly rehearsing the action of opening the chest. Seeing her so obviously wanting to open it, I could only smile.

At the same time, I had believed that to be something important. A necessary trait that any first-rate Nekomimineko player must have. That was, to enjoy the adventures within Nekomimineko.

“Go ahead. You were the one who defeated all of the monsters, so this is your obvious right.”

“Souma… Thank you!!”

I gave her a small push on the back, and she dashed towards the treasure chest, unable to hide her delight. She must have seriously wanted to open it, I thought, as she put her hands on the lid.

Normally, I would have proceeded cautiously with the possibility that it could be a trap or a mimic, but I knew in advance that that chest was not a trap, and it would have been uncouth to interrupt her when she was so overjoyed.

With me watching over her, Train Girl cheerfully opened the treasure chest.

“Umm… it only contained this.”

With a half smile, she pulled out a set of metal armor, polished until it sparkled.

That's right, that was unmistakably…

"Mithril light armor, right?"

…Mm. It really is disheartening to find the item you just bought in the next dungeon isn't it.

Part 2.

Taking everything into consideration, it was perfectly fine to have two sets of mithril armor. By officially yielding the first set of mithril armor to Train Girl and taking the new set for my own use, the matter was settled. While exiting the dungeon along the path we came, I asked Train Girl for her thoughts.

"So, how was it? Were you able to build some confidence in solo adventuring?"

I didn't expect this amount of practice to dramatically improve her dungeon exploration skills. What I had taught her was mostly knowledge that would only be useful in very specific situations, so it was hard to say that it would be applicable in the future.

The largest reason behind bringing Train Girl here was to give her the experience of clearing a dungeon, and have her start to believe that clearing a dungeon solo wasn't impossible after all.

"…I don't know."

However, betraying my expectations, Train Girl shook her head weakly.

“I see.”

Hearing my sullen reply, Train Girl slowly started talking.

“I’ve, said this while we were coming here. That this was the first time, that I’ve entered a dungeon with someone else. This adventure was, well… it was full of strange things, but I really, really, had fun… Right now, I can’t really imagine going back to exploring dungeons alone.”

It was an unexpected answer, but one that I should’ve expected. Train Girl had longed to adventure together with someone. As such, it should have been natural to imagine that this would happen if I brought Train Girl to a dungeon.

Even then, I did not reply to Train Girl that I would stay with her.

It was not that I could not bring myself to like Train Girl. I had tried making many excuses, but deep down I knew the truth. There was another reason why I stuck to solo playing in the game.

–Memories of that time that I had lost my comrades surfaced.

It was because I had started to like Train Girl that I had decided to definitely not become her companion. After all, with her power, there was no way she could survive the monsters and events that lie ahead. I could not see any way that she would be able to overcome the fierce battles that were to come.

“…I’m sure you’ll be able to find a great party.”

In the end, the only thing I was able to do was to say those consolatory words. Then, Train Girl would nod, and the conversation would end. Or so I thought.

“But…”

However, this time, it was different. Looking downwards, Train Girl continued.

“But then, that person wouldn’t be you, Souma. They wouldn’t be the person who worked hard for my sake, who connected with me over being loners, who laughed with me over stupid things.”

“I…”

I couldn’t figure out how to reply. Somehow, Train Girl’s words sounded even lonelier than when she had been lamenting about being a loner.

“Ahaha, I was just kidding, don’t worry about it.”

In the end, I had not been able to say anything until Train Girl broke the silence with a sad laugh.

Guilt pained my chest, but even then, I had to do what I had to do. Hardening my feelings, I forcibly changed the topic.

“…Now that we’ve explored a dungeon, next up is practicing skills. What do you think is the thing that you have to be the most careful about when you order a skill?”

I had intended to ask a simple, open-ended question to break the silence. However, Train Girl raised her head, looking at me with a confused look.

I thought that maybe she still hadn't gotten over trying to join my party, but that was not it.

Tilting her head, she asked.

"Uhm, Souma… What do you mean by 'order'?"

There was a quote from a book that had once been a popular bestseller, titled "The New Age of VR".

"When controlling a virtual avatar in VR, some move as their own body would, yet others move as if it were their own body."

It was an unnecessarily confusing, but it may well be an accurate description of the state of modern VR. Like with other revolutionary inventions, VR had changed the world slightly. Actually, it was still changing the world. But, as a result, there existed a small fraction of people who had not been able to keep up with the new technologies born from VR.

In the same way, I felt the existence of a similar wall between me and the inhabitants of this world.

"How do I use skills?"

“Yeah. I was wondering how you normally used skills, Train Girl.”

“Um, I think, I do it normally. I put myself in the skill’s activation pose, and just say the skill’s name…”

“Eh? You say it out loud?”

And what was this about an activation pose? I had thought that one of the advantages of skills was that they activated regardless of posture as long as you ordered it…

Seeing my confused expression, Train GIrl kindly explained.

“You know how there’s a skill icon for each of the skills you can use? With the icon, you can look up the name of the skill and its activation pose in the library. For example, with Slash, you raise your arm until it’s at the proper angle, and then you say ‘Slash’ and the skill activates…”

Train Girl glanced towards me with an anxious look, as if saying “Is there something wrong with what I’m saying?”

It would seem that this was the standard procedure for activating skills in this world. Still, something stood out.

“But if you had to say the name of the skill, then wouldn’t you be telling your opponent what skill you were about to use?”

Well, taking a set pose has the same problem, but shouting the name of a skill actually takes a surprising amount of time. You would leave yourself wide open, and continuously chaining skills with cancelling would be a dream within a dream.

Hearing my question, Train Girl nodded as if it were a given.

“Of course, but isn’t that the way it is?”

Hearing that, I recalled that it did seem like all the NPCs in the game had called out each of their skills. I had cringed every time I heard them, but who would’ve thought that it was an official setting.

“I mean, didn’t you use the skill Invisible Blade before, Souma? That time, you said its name, didn’t you?”

“…Y-yeah.”

Somehow she turned into the one asking questions, so I went with the flow. Still, Invisible Blade was just an alternate name for the skill, not its official name. At that time, I had been too excited and accidentally let it out of my mouth, but it wasn’t an action that contained any meaning.

In the first place, I was not using skills by yelling the skill’s name, but rather using skills by ‘ordering’ the skill’s name.

–Nowadays, people learned basic VR controls, ‘focus’ and ‘order’, as naturally as learning their mother language.

It had been said that with the evolution of computers, input methods have also evolved to be simpler and more intuitive. Fittingly, for the newest innovation that was VR, extraneous mechanical control devices like mice and keyboards were unneeded. The VR machine connected directly to the brain. So,

just by focusing your mind, just by thinking, everything could be controlled.

Just like with the computers in the past where a selection could be made by manipulating the pointer with a mouse and 'clicking', or like with touch panels by 'touching' on the screen, in VR space a selection could be made by 'focusing' on the projected icon.

Similarly, like how words could be input by 'typing' on a keyboard or 'speaking' through a speech recognition system, it was possible to 'order' the command to the VR machine.

But, if you were to ask me how exactly this was done, I would have a hard time explaining it. Both focusing and ordering were things that my generation naturally learned how to do, so it was difficult to try to explain how it worked.

If I were to try, I'd say that focusing was concentrating on a target, and ordering was to imagine what you wanted to input. Hopefully that should help you understand it slightly.

However, focusing was not the same as simply concentrating, and ordering was not the same as simply imagining. If you had to concentrate on every small part of something to select it it would be extremely frustrating, and if you had to imagine each letter one by one then your brain would get overrun by letters. Rather, focus and order were ways to avoid these issues.

That's why, focusing and ordering was not just concentrating or imagining, but rather some essence of it, formed into specialized VR controls.

Of course, the VR game Nekomimineko also utilized these controls.

To open the menu while in game you order, and to make selections in the menu you focus. Also, to use a skill like I've said before you order, and to select the target for a spell you focus.

It could be said that mastery of these two techniques was essential for playing this game. When starting out, there were people who just could not give orders without speaking them out loud, or those who took many minutes to even give a short order, but in a battle they'd be instantly eliminated. The only thing they could do was to slowly adapt to VR, get used to the game, until they could instantly focus and order, even while saying something completely unrelated.

In fact, what I did with saying Invisible Blade while ordering Sideswipe was actually quite an advanced technique. Though it was completely pointless!

However, for those not used to VR, most VR software came with assistive technologies. By turning on VR assistance in the options menu, it should become possible to play the game without focusing or ordering.

I've never used anything like that before, but from what I remembered of what I've heard, in many cases focusing was

replaced by pointing with a finger, and ordering was replaced with speaking out loud. Thinking about it that way, it could be that the way to use skills with VR assistance on was actually the same as what Train Girl said about taking a set pose and speaking the skill name.

I could imagine why the characters in this world did not use focus and order.

In general, NPCs did not speak words like menu, save, load, logout, or others that would make this world seem like a game.

In the same vein, techniques born from modern computers such as focus and order were probably thought to not fit within this middle age fantasy world. I recalled that other than in system messages, they had never been used in dialogue.

Though I did think that there were many other things that should've been the focus rather than creating a coherent world setting, this was a staff whose only strong points were fixating on details. Likely, even when this was a game, NPCs were set to use skills in the way that Train Girl talked about.

I might be misremembering, but I think even Old Tuto had said something like "to activate a skill, step into the activation pose and recite the skill name".

Since the people of this world had no concept of focus or order, to order a skill might be seen as somewhat like using a hidden command.

Actually, it was worse than that. If I had been unlucky, these two techniques might've become inaccessible just like the menu screen.

(If I had been thrown into this world in that situation…)

I trembled at the thought. The only reason that I had been able to somehow survive in this world until now was because the same methods from the game still worked here. If I was unable to order skills, then I probably would've long been killed in the very first event.

Perhaps focus and order had not been removed from this world because they had not been as conflicting to the setting as something like save or logout, or perhaps there was some other reason.

Either way, there was no point thinking about the reasons. In the end, I was able to order skills as normal in this world, so it doesn't matter why.

However…

(This means it'll be tricky to teach Train Girl skill cancelling.)

Lost in contemplation, I looked to find Train Girl staring at me wide-eyed, and thought.

In order to use skill cancelling, the next skill must be used before the previous skill ends. Having to say the skill name every time would probably make one miss the timing, not to mention that

taking a set pose in the middle of a skill was more or less fundamentally impossible.

Leaving aside the issue of whether the technique of skill cancelling would've spread, I had intended to at least have Train Girl test out whether she could use it, but it seemed like there was no point in doing that anymore.

Everything I knew about skills were based on the condition that they were activated through ordering. It would probably be hard for me to give advice on using skills to Train Girl. In that case, what I could do to help her was limited.

(I don't like head-on brawls… but there's no choice.)

Making up my mind, I turned to face Train Girl.

"Next, let's try some more realistic training."

"Souma Sagara requests a duel with Ina Traille!"

"Ina Traille accepts the duel, and swears to fight with all my might!"

As Train Girl finished yelling, a thin layer of white light surrounded both my body and Train Girl's.

You might be wondering what the heck we were doing, but this was all part of the duelling system, a useful function for sparring safely.

The word ‘duel’ invokes a dangerous image, but this was rather a system to ensure that there would be no danger involved. The duelling system meant there was no risk of death. No matter how fierce the battle is, as soon as your HP falls below a certain threshold, the film of light around you shatters with a flashy effect and the duel will end.

The HP threshold changes based on what words were said when starting the duel. “Fight with all my might” meant to continue the duel until 50% HP for example, and if it had been “fight to my limits” then the duel would continue until one of them had only 1HP left.

This also meant that no matter how strong of an attack you are hit with, it was impossible for your HP to fall below that threshold while in the duel.

It was impossible for your HP to fall to 0, in other words for you to die, so it was possible to fight without worrying.

However, the duel was only in effect between the ones who agreed to it, and there was nothing in place to protect against the interference of others. That your HP could not be reduced below the threshold also only applied to attacks from your opponent in the duel, so being hit with an attack by another character or a monster could still reduce your HP to 0 and kill you.

…Ahh, I would never forget.

One of the required story quests was The Duel in the Desert.

It was a horrible quest where, in order to progress with the event, you had to convince the event NPC of your strength by defeating them in a duel, but right when you reduced their HP to 1 and thought you won, the environment damage from the desert would kill the event NPC.

In the end, instead of focusing on how to best defeat your opponent, the quest became focused on ridiculous things like how to find the gaps between ticks of environment damage and quickly heal up the NPC during that time, but oh well.

It was to be expected from the Nekomimineko developers. I thought that the review which said “their hatred for debugging exceeds even vengeance for a parent’s murderer” was quite fitting, but oh well.

Anyways, like this, we could fight without worrying about killing each other.

“U-um, Souma! What, weapon should I use?”

It seemed she still had some reservations. With confidence, I replied to Train Girl.

“Didn’t I tell you this was weapons training? Use whatever weapon you’re planning to use in the future.”

“O-okay!”

On hearing my words, Train Girl hesitated slightly, then took out the short sword that an Armor Knight had dropped. This was a

weapon classified as both a dagger and a ninja sword, the Wakizashi.

I know what you're thinking.

I have no idea why a Western style Armor Knight would drop a traditional Eastern weapon like the Wakizashi, and no matter how you look at it a Wakizashi was definitely not a ninja sword, but this was Nekomimineko quality so there was nothing to do about it.

Still, not minding all that, it was still an item dropped by a level 70 monster. Even though it wasn't as good as Shiranui, it was still quite a high quality weapon.

Combined with the offensive ability of the level 57 Train Girl, I, still wearing my beginner's equipment, should be no match for it. However…

"S-Souma! Are you seriously using that!?"

Seeing what I was planning on facing her with, Train Girl raised her voice in protest.

"Is there a problem?"

I feigned ignorance, and Train Girl yelled at me, her face red.

"Of course there's a problem! Something like that's obviously not a weapon isn't it!"

I couldn't blame Train Girl for getting mad.

She had probably thought my primary weapon would be something like a sword or a knife. But, what I held in my hands was neither a sword nor a knife. It wasn't an axe or a spear either, nor any of the many other types of weapons. What I had was a wooden stick.

"There's no problem, since I won't be attacking anyways."

Without a weapon equipped, not only was the power of a weapon not added to your offensive power, weapon mastery bonus was not applied, and weapon skills couldn't even be activated. Since even Step cancelling couldn't be used, the rapid cancel dash also couldn't be used.

My techniques have almost all been sealed, but even then it was necessary to take on Train Girl with this.

I could not listen to Train Girl's complaints.

"…I, won't hold back, then."

"Bring it on!"

Seeing that I was waiting like I had announced, Train Girl made the first move.

Though she said that she wouldn't hold back, she must have still felt bad about attacking someone without even a proper weapon with full force.

Against that half-hearted attack, I…

“Eh?”

Easily stopped it with the wooden stick.

The attack should’ve still had a decent amount of power behind it, but I didn’t feel the impact at all.

This was probably due to some assistance from the game. It seemed like this would be good practice after all.

“I-I can do better!”

Train Girl focused her eyes. Even if she called herself a beginner, she was still an adventurer, someone who fights for a living. She wouldn’t be done with just that.

Throwing aside her hesitation, she pulled Wakizashi back,

“Jump Attack!”

and activated a dagger skill. Unlike the previous swing from the waist, this was a skill which started an attack after jumping off one leg.

Most likely, she had thought that normal attacks wouldn’t work on me.

It was the right decision. Indeed, even to just seize the initiative, it was the correct move.

Jump Attack was one of the faster offensive dagger skills, and probably also the strongest skill that she was able to use. It meant that once she had switched herself into battle mode, she was not planning to show any mercy. It was quite commendable.

(However…!)

Since it had not been activated through cancelling, it had an obvious attack animation. It was even more obvious when the skill's name had just been yelled out. All I did was to place the wooden stick in the path of the skill, and,

"What!"

what should've been a killing blow was instead very easily stopped.

"Careful!"

More than that, I pushed back on her weapon, frozen from the after-cast stun.

Train Girl lost her balance, stumbling backwards.

(Mm, this doesn't feel half bad.)

Thinking back, since I had in a sense been cheating in my fight with the female bandit, this was actually my first real fight with another human, and I was doing better than I had imagined.

A big component of this might've been that since I no longer had to fear dying, I was able to move as I had in the game.

(I should drag this out a bit though, for Train Girl's sake too.)

While I vigilantly readied my wooden stick towards Train Girl, whose eyes had completely turned into those of a fighter, I took on an expression of composure, and yelled out.

"Come at me!"

Who knows how long had passed since the beginning of the duel.

I had still not been hit even once, continuing to parry Train Girl's attacks.

"Why, why can't I hit you…!"

…There were of course very good reasons behind that.

First of all, differences in stats between characters didn't affect things much.

Stamina and speed were parameters that did not change through level-ups, and while Train Girl had higher stamina and speed compared to normal characters, there wasn't too much of a difference when she was not in Train Mode. Differences in Attack, Defense, and the like did not play much of a role in this situation.

Next, regarding combat styles, both Train Girl and I were self-taught. I had realized this during the fight, but normal adventurers probably weren't very well versed in fighting other humans.

Adventurers generally trained themselves in order to fight monsters, and there weren't that many human shaped monsters. In any case, if you were going to fight monsters, rather than learning feints with questionable effectiveness, it would be easier to raise your own offensive power.

This was true of someone who relied mainly on skills to fight like me, and as a beginner adventurer, Train Girl also did not have much knowledge in the ways of anti-personnel tactics.

–That's why, this result could only be attributed to the difference between Train Girl fighting with this world as reality, and me fighting with this world as a game.

It was the basics of a game to grasp the specs of the character being controlled.

I had an understanding of not only the maximum speed of my limbs and the reach of my joints, but even the flexibility of my body. And I knew that as long as it was within those specs, this body would not feel any discomfort no matter how absurdly it was controlled.

Drastic movements did chip away stamina, but as long as I did not use any skills, with the rings on I pretty much did not need to worry about running out of stamina.

Conversely, what about Train Girl?

The newest VR AIs were amazing, even the ones in games. Research on human motions culminated in these AIs moving almost as if they were human. But, put another way, this meant that even if superhuman movements were possible based on their specs, they would still end up emulating human movements.

Whether it was because of that, or if it was because she had been an actual human in this world, in the end, Train Girl used her body like a real human would.

This was the insurmountable difference between me and her.

Still, between the attacker and the defender, the attacker held an advantage. Even for me, it was difficult to continue to defend against all of her attacks without messing up even once.

The only reason I had been able to do so was due to yet another aspect of the game.

“Then, how about this!?”

Train Girl struck sharply just as I happened to lose my balance, but I manipulated the wooden stick with just my wrists and stopped the attack.

“How!”

Train Girl yelled in dismay.

I had just barely managed to block with the wooden stick in time, but I was still completely off balance. From a physics point of view, it wouldn’t have been strange for the momentum from Train Girl’s attack to have broken through my guard, but that didn’t happen.

From living in this world, I had come to realize something.

It was, at least in the case of battles, that rules leaned more towards game mechanics than physical laws. That’s why, rather than the force of an attack being mass times acceleration,

everything was decided based on the numerical values for offensive power.

“Here I come!”

Having hit a shield with superior parameters, the Wakizashi was bounced back by the stick in my hand. Train Girl stumbled ever so slightly. Seizing that chance, for the first time since the start of this duel, I attacked.

“Guh.”

Once again, stick and blade collided. However, it was only for an instant. The stick in my hand easily pushed Train Girl back.

“Why!”

Once again, I heard Train Girl’s dejected cry.

If this was back in the real world, I probably wouldn’t be capable of such incomprehensible movements, nor would I have even thought to try.

But here, it didn’t matter if these were movements that would cause a normal body to scream in protest. Even the occasional physically unnatural movements were fine as long as it was within this body’s specs.

I was certain of this. You could even say that I believed in this.

After all, just think about it. It should be immediately obvious to everyone.

–There was no way such an advanced program like one that prevents absurd movements would have been built into Nekomimineko's characters!!

"Kyaa!"

This time, Train Girl let out an actual scream as I knocked the Wakizashi out of her hand.

I let out a deep breath.

It seemed that even without using any skills, my stamina regeneration still wasn't able to keep up after continuously moving around so much. My body felt sluggish, like I had just finished an intense exercise in the real world.

Oh well, that's probably enough for today.

I extended a hand towards Train Girl, collapsed on the ground,

"I surrender."

"Huh?"

and announced the end of today's training session.

A bit after the practice duel had ended.

"Souma, you're really amazing. Amazing… but… uuuu!"

Train Girl was an adventurer after all, it seemed that she was frustrated that she wasn't able to defeat me.

Still, there had been no hard feelings, and rather we were conversing more intimately than before the duel. It was as if

through a fierce battle, we had strangely gotten closer to each other.

I didn't like how it sounded like something muscleheads would say, but I became aware that it was not just Train Girl, that even I had felt a bit closer to her than before the fight.

"I don't really get it, but somehow, what you did, was unfair!"

It seemed that she still felt the result of the duel was was unjustified, as Train Girl once again complained.

Well, I can't really blame her.

To be honest, I myself didn't even expect to be able to overwhelm Train Girl to such a degree. And, sorry for Train Girl but, after fighting so much I had come to believe in myself a bit more.

I mean, having found out that my style of fighting using game logic was effective, of course I would be happy.

"Those aren't the movements of a human!"

Train Girl was still grumbling at me, but in a sense she was correct.

It was also the reason for her loss.

Well, thinking about it, it was really quite simple.

–Those who can't discern games from reality will eventually find themselves with a rude awakening.

"Oh, right…"

Caught up in the fighting, I had almost forgotten our initial purpose.

“How many dagger skills do you know right now?”

“Eh? I, I think, three…”

“You should go check later whether you’ve learned the 4th skill.”

“Uhm… okay.”

There was no way I would’ve learned a new skill so easily.

Probably while thinking something like that, Train Girl slowly nodded her head, but I knew otherwise. Nevermind the 4th skill, she had probably already learned the 5th skill, and maybe even the 6th and 7th skill.

(Thank you once more for your guidance, Master Torch.)

Offering some words of thanks in my heart, I gently stroked the wooden stick that I had been holding since the duel, and carefully put it away in my bag.

After we returned to town, I parted with Train Girl who said she was going to visit her mother, and returned to the inn first.

Maybe it was because many taxing things happened today. I didn’t feel like doing anything else, only wanting to hurry up and rest. I suitably dispatched of the inn owner who asked about my plans for dinner and returned to my room, where I immediately dropped to sleep like a log.

When I opened my eyes again, it was the next morning.

(I really overslept this time…)

While regretting it, I tried to rise,

“Egyaa!”

but in doing so, I felt something like a strange jolt of electricity run through my body, and let out a weird shout.

(What’s going on?)

It was an unpleasant yet familiar feeling, as if my body was stiff all over.

It was extremely reminiscent of a certain condition that I had experienced many times in the real world.

“But, there’s no way, right?”

I instinctively tried to deny it.

If something like that was possible, then it should’ve already happened to me yesterday morning. I mean, the day before yesterday, I spent quite a long time exercising with Master Torch…

But as I thought about it a bit more, when I was cutting the Master Torch underground, the first half had been with skills, and the second half was mostly tiny cuts, so I didn’t actually spend all that much time vigorously moving my body.

Even then, it would have been an extreme amount of exercise if it were in the real world, but the amount of exercise during the duel yesterday exceeded even that.

I couldn't believe it, but…

"Ow!"

With the pain that ran through my body, the term *sore muscles* popped into my head.

Just like how this world was more like a game than reality, it was also more like reality than a game.

During battles, the game's rules took priority, so I had been able to move my body just as in the game, and fight just as in the game.

However, could the law of the real world that "intense exercise makes one tired" really be said to have a place only within battles?

In this world that was more like reality than a game, wouldn't there be rules that carried over from reality as well?

"…Ah."

Absorbed in my thoughts, I committed an inexcusable mistake.

My weakened body naturally leaned backwards, and I started to fall back towards the bed.

(Oh no!!)

Whether I tried to stand firm and prevent myself from falling, or if I did nothing and fell back onto the bed, I would be putting strain on my body.

If I forced my body to move in this situation, there was no telling what would happen.

Facing the impending inevitability, I thought to myself.

…Well, thinking about it, it was really quite simple.

“Migyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

–Those who can’t discern games from reality will eventually find themselves with a rude awakening.

Part 3.

The fourth day of my life in a game.

This morning already started in the worst possible way, but Train Girl arriving after hearing my scream added even more trouble to the mix.

“Eh? Souma, you have sore muscles? Leave it to me! I’m really good at giving massages!”

Train Girl cheerfully slid towards me. I couldn’t even run away because of my sore muscles.

“It’s okay it’s okay you don’t need to!”

“There’s nothing to worry about! Even my mother complimented my massages, like ‘Your massages have always been your only strong point. You’re so good at giving them that it’s a bit… lewd.’…”

“For a frail sickly character your mom’s much more open than I’d expected! After hearing something like that I really don’t need it! Seriously!”

Luckily, the appearance of the inn owner who decided to come see what the commotion in the room was cut short this exchange that some would probably refuse to accept as not flirtatious.

“Huh, sore muscles? Then why aren’t you using a potion?”

With one sentence he closed the curtains on the topic.

At that time, I did not miss Train Girl nonchalantly turning away from me.

–This girl, she knew!

After using a potion, my sore muscles were completely healed.

After presenting both the inn owner with a shovel and Train Girl with the Iron Claw as thanks, I set out for the town.

“Even though my muscles aren’t sore anymore, I’m going to spend today leisurely exploring town and shopping. I don’t have anything in particular planned, so you don’t need to…”

“I’m coming with you!”

“…I see.”

Interrupted with so much vigor, I lost my words of argument.

Seeing Train Girl walking beside me so happily, I found myself with mixed feelings.

There were two reasons behind why I prioritized Train Girl’s training.

As I said before, one of the reasons is that I wanted to rid myself of her. In other words, making sure that she would be alright by herself when I leave was half of the reasons. The other half was from my wish that while the two of us were together, she wouldn’t be the only one to die.

I didn’t have such grand inclinations like wanting to protect everyone in this world, but neither did I have or want the mental strength to be able to overlook the death of someone I knew.

There’s no way I would want to live with the guilt that someone died because of me, and no matter how troublesome or annoying someone is, it’s a given that I would rather they be alive than dead.

Ideally, I would rather they be able to live peacefully even without me around, but I decided to at the very least try and ensure that they don’t die while I’m around.

It was quite a short-sighted determination, but it was what the current me seriously believed in.

(But, I don't really need to anymore…)

Fundamentally, Nekomimineko's party system did not have any kind of bonus.

Like I once explained, the system was such that all the experience goes to whoever deals the final blow, so trying to speed level a low level person was rather difficult.

Through Train Girl's special Train Mode, we were able to rapidly raise her level to 57, but even this had its limits. Train Mode only activates when I spend a set amount of time in a field near Ramlich. Obviously the Sealed Demon's Labyrinth was out of the question, and the place around Ramlich where the next highest levelled monsters appears was the Cave of Trials.

It would probably still be relatively easy to level up to 75 or 76, but once a character's level exceeds the enemy's level, the amount of experience obtained is vastly reduced.

Especially when there's more than a 5 level difference, this reduction becomes substantial. Even with Train Mode it would likely be difficult to level up further than that. In order to level up past that we would have to leave Ramlich, but Train Girl's Train Mode only activates near Ramlich.

However, without Train Mode, Train Girl was really no more than just a mere adventurer.

And in the first place, there was no need to level up any further in order to live here at Ramlich.

(I really don't think I can bring her along…)

Even I hadn't started out as a solo player. For the first while, I had formed parties with low level NPCs right from the start of the game, and played through while trying to keep the levels of both the NPCs and myself around the same.

At that time, not only had I not considered playing solo, I generally hadn't even thought about switching out the members of my party. It could be said that that period was when I had most innocently enjoyed playing Nekomimineko, but at the same time it was the period where me or my party members had died most frequently.

In this world now without save and load, if a normal character was to adventure with me, it wouldn't be anything but an act of suicide.

(Well, that leaves the question of who can travel with me without dying…)

At the very least, with my current strength there were many characters who fit that criteria.

There were countless OP characters in this world that could join your party. If you manage to recruit one of them early on then you may be able to comfortably progress in your adventures.

The highest leveled NPC in this game was said to be "The Phantom Hero Alex".

Donning golden armor and possessing unrivaled swordsmanship, he was a bold and fearless level 200 hero. His specs were at a level that made one think that he would be fine as the protagonist, but unfortunately I had never met him even in game.

It seemed that his thoughts were filled with nothing but “defeat the Demon Lord”, so he set out alone for the Demon Lord’s Castle right at the start of the game, and was defeated before players could even meet him. He was a good example that there was a time and place even for being bold and fearless.

His suicidal endeavor was as famous as that of the Armor Knights of the Cave of Trials, and in a sense he could be said to be a pretty rare character. However, he seemed to be the production’s go-to character as there was close to ten exclusive events pertaining to him, but of course nobody seems to have cleared them yet.

Really, everything about him was phantom-like.

Both in the sense of the game and in an ordinary sense, I would’ve liked him to stay alive if possible, but three days had already passed since the start of the game. It wouldn’t be strange if he had long since bit the dust already, so it was probably pointless trying to rely on him.

Let’s think a bit more realistically.

If we’re talking about strong characters that one could encounter around these parts, then it would have to be “The Helping

Cheeter". She was a helpful character that would randomly appear while you were doing a quest, and was famous as the strongest female adventurer in Nekomimineko. She was a swordstress who massacred enemies with cheating-level agility, giving birth to the catchphrase "the only character who moves slower when using Step", and a double meaning to her nickname Cheeter.

She would suddenly pop up and help clear a single quest, but the chain of quests resulting from that encounter could eventually result in her officially joining your party.

Though her frightening maneuverability and offensive abilities demolish enemies, the opinion of her as a party member was quite mixed.

She was too strong and too quick, killing all of the enemies and making it impossible for the player to gain any experience.

Her settings meant that she would not help in defeating the Demon Lord, but her overwhelming strength was such that she was thought to be able to solo kill even the Demon Lord.

Her personality was whimsical and cold… but her exclusive events were mostly clichéd romcom events in a lapse of character.

But well, if I told you that my level 300+ character was killed ten times over within those clichéd romcom events, then that should give you a rough idea of how strong she was.

In any case, she was not really someone that I would want to rely on in this world.

Other than her, there were also men like “Perverted Warrior Jane”, “Tea Drinking Ryden”, or “Frighteningly Blasphemous Hole Digging Rose Piercer Whose Name I Hesitate to Say”, where looking past their eccentricities they could be a force to be relied on.

But if you asked me whether I would like any of them to be my companions, I would be a bit… well for the last one I honestly don’t even want to see him.

Otherwise, I might as well try for one of the members of the royalty that only appear in events.

From the event battles within the game, it seemed that the royalty of the country of Licht: the king, queen, and princess, were all quite OP. They were strong enough that made one want to say, “why don’t you all just go defeat the Demon Lord yourselves?”. In particular, the princess Shelmia was one of the most popular characters even within the game, and in the past few popularity rankings she had never failed to make it into the top ten.

In game you could unfortunately not team up with them, and in fact couldn’t even meet them outside of events, but in this world it might be possible depending on how I go about it. Of course, in order to do so I had to at least make my way to the capital, so it wasn’t someone that I could add to my party right this moment.

Mmm, I inadvertently let out a hum.

Was it just my imagination that character strengths seemed to be inversely correlated to their normalcy? After all, the surprising lack of decent characters was enough to make me accept playing solo.

(Inverse to their power… now that I think about it…)

Going just by power, I should probably also consider "The Strongest Genius Idiot Magician Sazaan".

Well… I'll only consider it.

You might have imagined it just from hearing his name, but there were rumors that just by adding this character to your party "your survival chance decreases by half" or "your death chance increases by 500%". He was the strongest character in a negative sense, suited only for the most masochistic players.

Still, just from specs alone, Sazaan could be said to be one of the strongest magician-type characters.

After all, his ability values and spell power were high. Stupidly high. But that was also what resulted in many victims.

There were innumerable complaints about him. To begin with, Nekomimineko AIs were already not what one would call great, but Sazaan was another two levels beyond that. His AI, polished in a bad sense by what could only be called an agglomeration of the producers' ill will, had caused many players to rediscover what rage felt like.

The least of the problems was casting Concentrate which boosts the power of the next spell by 100% and then casting magic that inflict status effects with high probability, but he also prioritizes waking up sleeping monsters with weak offensive spells, for some reason with high probability trying to inflict status effects on monsters with low magic defense, and even though those enemies are mostly physical types for some reason only using Berserk on them and instead making them stronger, sometimes yelling out, “t-the seal in my right hand is…!” and acting as if trying to suppress his right hand from going berserk, and when you think that he’s just looking for attention his right hand’s seal actually breaks and annihilates the party, or when monsters get too close trying to use explosive magic to protect himself but in the end killing himself, wears a weird mask, when hit he falls into a panic and shoots magic indiscriminately, when you try to heal him he clicks his tongue, when there are more than two enemies always using AOE fire magic even if it would hit allies, using fire magic even against fire-type monsters and instead healing them, trying to use fire magic even when underwater and failing, using fire magic even in a forest and causing a large forest fire, yet when an eventual monster weak to fire appears for some reason using wind magic which he wasn’t even good at, randomly laughing out of nowhere, and when asked just says, “Sorry, I just remembered something funny”, thoughtlessly setting his magic to go as far as it can and aggroing distant or strong enemies and changing the tides of battle, unpunctual,

casually attacking monsters in a counter state and being countered, always talking about probabilities, when doing nothing and entering idle mode would start talking about his past life unprompted, and the details change every time, and wasn't even consistent, always uses the highest rank magic regardless of the enemy's level resulting in overkill, not just the enemy but even overkilling the enemy's item drops that had HP, always uses the highest rank magic regardless of the enemy's level resulting in the cast still not being finished even when the fight was over, and even after the fight was over would still continue casting thus delaying the whole party, would sometimes mess up the cast location so the offensive magic that ends up being cast after the fight was over ends up killing an ally, new enemies would come drawn by the magic's effects, always uses the highest rank magic regardless of the enemy's level resulting in running out of MP during important times, after running out of MP would charge straight at the enemy even with only cloth armor and be immediately killed, immediately blames others for his failures, his words when winning were condescending, his victory pose was annoying, had bad table manners, I don't like how he saves his favorites for last, would come dressed in hard to move clothing when going hiking, complains when bitten by bugs, always wants to take a break, in the end I had to piggyback him down the mountain, becomes unrestrained after drinking, always drunk on himself even when not drinking, can't talk while looking people in the eye, blaming

not being able to talk while looking people in the eye on his mask, somehow just remembering his name makes me irritated, because of him there's more case of stiff shoulders and aching backs, because of him there was global warming, but even so one of the strongest magics, "Stardust Flare", could only be obtained from one of his events so I have to have him in my party at least once, so, he was really, really the worst person ever.

You might think I'm making it up, but this was all true. As proof of that, for some reason I'm really irritated, and even though I didn't have stiff shoulders or an aching back, I felt like I did.

It must be because I had remembered his name.

(Compared to that…)

I looked at Train Girl walking beside me.

"Uhm, is something wrong?"

I had been a bit mad at her in the morning, but a small prank like offering to massage my sore muscles, it was actually rather cute in comparison.

"Train Girl, honestly, you're like an angel."

"Eh? Uehhhh!?"

Watching over the visibly flustered Train Girl with a faint smile, I decided to be prudent in forming my party, even if it ends up taking some time.

Part 4.

For a while after I called her an angel, Train Girl was in a good mood, but as we continued through town, her behavior started to become noticeably strange.

“Souma, this way is… ah, nothing, nevermind.”

She frequently glanced up towards me, as if feeling uneasy about something.

I walked on without paying too much attention to it, but,

“U-um, why don’t we go that way instead? Like, towards the main street?”

“Eh? Ah, but…”

She suddenly pulled on my hand, trying to turn me in a different direction.

I wondered what had caught her whim, but her expression showed that there was some sort of purpose to her actions.

“Weren’t you looking enviously at the weapon store or accessory store before? If you have no plans for today, we can shop around those stores as much as you want!”

Saying that, Train Girl pulled on my arm.

It seems she had seen through my desire to visit the other stores after we had left the item shop yesterday. I had thought she was quite insensitive to these things, but she was unexpectedly perceptive.

Maybe this was Train Girl's way of showing consideration, but there was a place that I needed to check out first.

"We can go to the stores later. In order to be able to shop around without worrying, there's a place I have to take a quick look at."

Located opposite from the church south of the town, it was just north of the town.

In the direction we were headed towards was the station for what was said to be the fastest vehicle in this world, the Skyboat.

"The Skyboat is dangerous!"

As we reached the station, those were the words that Train Girl immediately said.

"…Really?"

"I mean, isn't it strange for those clumps of metal to be flying through the air?!"

"Ah, mm. I guess."

She started spouting words like what someone who fears airplanes in the real world would say. However, I couldn't say that I didn't understand her sentiment.

To put it simply, the Skyboat was something like a flying yacht, a ship that moves by the mana that hits its sails.

Opinions were split on why they hadn't made this just a normal airship. They must've wanted to flaunt their originality.

And when it comes to originality in Nekomimineko, its existence essentially serves to annoy and exasperate the players. Applied to this Skyboat…

“Also, this boat sometimes falls!”

That happens.

The capacity of a Skyboat is around 20 people. It rides on the waves of mana in the air, called the mana flow, in order to stay aloft, but since the mana flow is erratic, it wasn’t possible to make the boat too large, and schedules were often erratic.

In addition, the smallest things would cause the mana flow to shift, so the chance of an accident was nothing to scoff at. In the game, the chance of a crash landing was marked at close to a surprising 30%.

“And when it falls it’s usually in a nest of monsters! It’s one thing if you have a Teleportation Stone like the merchants do, but riding the Skyboat without one is just suicide!”

“I don’t think it’s as bad as that though…”

For example, if I were to ride this from Ramlich towards the capital, it would still be fine if it crashed near Ramlich. It would take some time to make it back, but the enemies here were at most level 50. It would not be impossible to make it back alive.

However, in the off chance that it crashed closer to the capital, then only the worst awaited.

The first time I had boarded this boat, it had handsomely fallen out of the sky. While I had no idea what was going on, the boat made an emergency landing, and the other passengers used Teleportation Stones to return to town one after another, leaving me by myself in an unfamiliar field. Still unable to process what had happened, I tried desperately to make it back to a safe area… and died.

I only found out later that I had landed in Slime Forest, where at worst the enemies reached level 120. There was nothing a player who was barely level 50 could do. …I honestly don't even want to think about what had happened then.

Let's just say that there's no way for a player from Ramlich to survive if the Skyboat crashed somewhere like there.

"I think that there's something wrong with anyone who would ride something like this!"

That's why I could understand Train Girl's forcefulness… but.

"Um, you do realize this is the station for the Skyboat right?"

"…Ah."

The glares from the people around us were extremely scary.

She must've felt bad about it as she lowered her voice, but surprisingly her determination did not waver.

"I don't mean to insult this boat, but I really don't think that anyone should ride this boat!"

That's insulting the boat isn't it… but the atmosphere wasn't one where I could say that. What's more, her voice grew loud again.

"Uhm, so, are you more of a carriage person?"

"C-carriages are no good either!"

"Eh, why?"

I wanted to cool her down by changing the topic, but somehow she became more excited.

"C-carriages are… it's animal cruelty!"

"A-ahh, mm. Poor horses. Yeah."

They're being worked as workhorses after all.

What a philanthropist you are, Train Girl.

"Carriages are no good, but, e-either way, the Skyboat is dangerous!"

Train Girl was heating up without limit. At this rate it'll only be a matter of time before we're thrown out of here. I frantically tried to soothe her.

"L-let's calm down a bit. I'm not really thinking of getting on that thing and going somewhere right this moment. I'm just checking it out for the…"

"No! Once you check it out, I'm sure you're going to end up wanting to ride it!"

What am I, a kid! …That's not what matters.

“I can tell you really dislike the Skyboat, Train Girl. If you hate it that much, it’s okay if you go ahead to the main street.”

“Eh…?”

Why are you making such a hurt expression?

Did you want to be together with me that badly? Though we’re both loners, Train Girl and I are very different types of loners, so there are times where we can’t understand each other.

Still, nothing good could come from Train Girl continuing to hang around this place.

So, how can I convince her. I racked my brains, and tried to suggest something that would be easy for her to accept.

“Uhm, like, we haven’t sold the drop items from the Cave of Trials yet right? It’d be a big help if you could sort that out or something, you know…”

“I… I guess I can do that.”

I hadn’t expected it to work, but it seemed to have an effect.

This must also be because of her long history of being a loner, as she loved to be useful to others.

Just by looking, I could tell that the joy of being given a mission clashing with the angst of leaving me here alone caused a severe conflict within her.

“I-in that case, you’re not allowed to do anything like board the Skyboat while I’m not here, okay?”

She looked up at me with an insecurity on the level of a puppy drenched by rain.

I don't know what she's so worried about, but it didn't seem like she was about to head off immediately. I answered her as gently as I could, and finally she nodded.

"…Okay. Then I'll go on ahead, and sell off the items we got from the cave."

"Mm. Thank you."

Train Girl already had all of the drop items from the Armor Knights. At first she had said something like we should at least split it because I was the reason that we got these items, but when I replied that it was a pain to deal with so take it all, she quickly agreed.

"I'll head over soon. Take care."

Suppressing my actual thoughts, I sent her off, and Train Girl replied.

"Roger! Ah, but you better come soon! If you don't, I'll slander you all over the bulletin board in the plaza!"

Leaving behind some ominous words, Train Girl run back down the path we came from.

"…Haaa."

After Train Girl disappeared out of sight, I let out a sigh. I hadn't expected Train Girl to be this prejudiced against the Skyboat. If I

had known, I would've come up with some excuse to act separately from the very start.

Maybe this was part of the reason why Train Girl never left Ramlich in the game.

"Okay, nevermind that, where's the departures schedule…"

I searched for it, and immediately found it.

The next departure was tonight at 9. The following was the day after tomorrow at 8am, then noon on the day after that. The next one was another three days later. As can be seen, it was quite irregular.

Focusing just on the irrelevant details, it was indeed Nekomimineko quality.

A one-way ticket to the capital was a staggering 50000E. It wasn't an amount that couldn't be covered by what I had left of Melipe's legacy, but to a beginning adventurer this was a harsh cost.

But considering that 30% of the time the boat would be lost, they might not be able to keep up business without charging this much.

…It had an unpleasant sense of realism.

By the way, with the Teleportation Stone that Train Girl had briefly mentioned, it was possible to move from town to town instantly.

However, that generally did not show up as a drop item until the mid game, and in the rare cases it is up for sale, it would normally go for over 300000E. With my current status that was definitely out of my league.

The other means of transportation would be either through walking or via carriage, but there were a bunch of events with carriages that could make it even more dangerous than walking, and walking would end up taking an extremely long time.

I once tested this after clearing the game by taking the shortest path possible, but even then it took close to two whole days in game time. There were also fields in that path that my current self wouldn't stand a chance in, so all in all the Skyboat was the top choice for going to the capital.

The departure time and the path that the Skyboat takes changes every time, and depending on that the danger could vary greatly.

For a bit, I stayed there analyzing the departures table and route chart, relying on my vague memory to determine which had the smallest chance of an accident.

"It took longer than I expected."

I had become a bit too absorbed in checking routes for the Skyboat. After I came back to my senses, I hurried to the weapon store, but Train Girl was not there.

There were many weapons in the drops so I thought she'd come here, but maybe she went to a different store first, or maybe she had already sold the weapons and moved to a different store.

I considered going to another store to look for her, but the many weapons that decorated the walls caught my attention.

Well, she knows that I wanted to come to the weapons store anyways, so she might come searching for me here.

Telling that excuse to myself, I started to inspect the weapons that lined the store.

"Yo, kid! You seem to be having trouble. Need any help?"

As my eyes gleamed at the weapons in front of me, a bald old man called out to me with an overpowering voice. With his muscular build, eyepatch, and bald head, he gave off an impression that makes one think he'd be better as an adventurer than a weapons store owner.

"Give me a bit more time."

However, I ignored the pressure coming from behind me, and continued to glance at the array of countless weapons.

Though I was used to weapons in game, the impact from these weapons that had become real was way different from those in the game.

Whether it was due to knowing in advance that these were real, the weight, glimmer of the blade, and even the unique feeling from holding each and every one of these weapons gave me a

feeling of fear and exhilaration. The sight of these swords, spears, axes, and such lined up by type could only be called a work of art.

Within them, I turned my eyes towards the highest priced weapon.

Written on its tag was <Piercing Spear 6000E>, and its shape and price were both as I remembered from the game.

It would not have been strange if the price had changed now that this world had become reality, but it doesn't seem to have happened yet.

As I looked at the Piercing Spear, a bantering voice came from behind me.

"Haha! I'd give up on that one, kid! That one costs 6000E you know. It's not something that a newbie adventurer like you could afford."

Hearing that, I finally realized.

Now that I think about it, I was still wearing beginner equipment, not yet having changed out of it. That must be why he had called out to me.

(Hmm, what should I do…)

Trying to argue that I wasn't a beginner now would be awkward, and just by looking at my level I was as good as a beginner.

But even I had a bit of pride. Isn't it human nature to want to land a surprising comeback after being belittled so much?

I was just about thinking that I wanted some weapons, so this was perfect.

I stopped looking at the weapons on the wall, and turned towards the bald shopkeeper.

“Nn? Kid, what…”

As if stopping him from saying any more, I forced my words through.

“I want one of the most expensive of each type of weapon in this store. Could you calculate my bill?”

I said it to him straight, and for a moment the shopkeeper was wide-eyed as if he could not comprehend what I just said. Then, he scratched his bald head as if troubled, and said.

“Ahh, sorry, kid. You see, I’m also a customer…”

I felt so humiliated.

Part 5.

The person who came to offer me unwanted advice about weapons was an adventurer called Cruggs. But, I didn’t care about that in any way.

Yeah, I know, Cruggs was just trying to help.

But I wish he’d just leave me alone. At least for now, I wanted him to just go away somewhere.

“…Sigh.”

Having embarrassingly triggered the flag with this skinhead adventurer, I proceeded to place the same order with the actual shopkeeper and hurriedly checked out, leaving the store as if escaping.

“You’re late, Souma!”

It was right after that I bumped into Train Girl.

Having finally met up, though not quite angry, Train Girl seemed slightly sullen.

“Souma, I couldn’t find you anywhere… I was even almost about to go check the Skyboat platform again!”

“A-Ahh. Sorry about that. So, have you sold the items?”

“Oh man, that was a big pain too you know!?”

Despite what she was saying, Train Girl seemed to be quite thrilled.

It seemed that she had gone around to various stores for appraisals and conducted her trades so she could sell them for as much as possible. Being a loner yet having good social skills, what a rare combination.

“And the results are… an amazing 38000E!”

“Ooohh!”

I wasn’t sure if that should be a lot or not, but since Train Girl seemed happy I thought I’d at least cheer with her.

Actually, it did seem a bit more than what I had expected. There were only around ten drop items, so each of them would've had to have gone for around 4000E.

If it was like back in the game and sale prices were set at half of the purchase price, each of them would have had to be priced at even more than the Piercing Spear from earlier.

"U-Uhm, since you said you didn't want any of it, I sold everything except the Wakizashi, is that okay?"

"Huh? Yeah, that's fine."

I nodded unhesitatingly.

Since Armor Knights are essentially heavy armor, the type of equipment that they drop were almost all pieces of heavy armor. Though their defense values were quite enticing, the increased weight of the equipment dulls movement.

The decrease of speed due to weight applies to skills as well, and there were basically no ways around it. Taking into account the current fighting styles of both Train Girl and me, there was no choice but to give up on them.

"Phew. So if we split this in half, it's 19000E for each of us!"

And of course, she was fully intent on splitting it in half. Even though I think it would've been fine for Train Girl to take all of it since she was the one who did all the work.

However, it probably wouldn't benefit anyone if I tried to push back on this. If anything, based on her personality Train Girl would probably be happier if I accepted.

"Alright, thank you."

I held out the crystal that served as my wallet, and,

"Okay, I'm transferring it!"

Train Girl touched it with her own crystal, transferring magic power between them. As simple as that, 19000E was moved into my crystal.

For the amount of danger, farming with Train Mode at the Cave of Trials was quite efficient. Even if all of the earnings were split in half, the amount should be more than enough to become Train Girl's savings.

While we chattered on about such things, we headed towards the Accessory Shop as our next destination.

An Accessory Shop sounds like the type of store that female middle-schoolers would frequent, but of course accessories in this world referred to the type of accessories worn on the neck, wrists, and fingers, and of course each of them increased a character's abilities as a piece of equipment.

Compared to armor, the effects of each of them were small, but with one each on the neck and wrist, as well as two for the fingers, a total of four accessories could be equipped, meaning that their effects could not be overlooked.

In addition, now that the equipment could not be changed from the menu screen anymore, it takes time to change things like armor.

However, changing rings is easy, and it was simple to change them to match the type of enemy. I believe that there is absolutely no downside to having them.

The shop's inventory was unchanged from when it was a game.

Maybe because they were items in the very first town, there was nothing with very high effects. They offered more or less placebo effects such as raising defense slightly, strengthening elemental attacks by five percent, allowing the use of an elementary elemental magic, or increasing natural HP recovery by 20%.

However, there did exist items famous just because of their weak effects.

(Since I'll probably use a ninja sword sometime in the future, something like this will be a must have.)

From within them, I found [Ring of Light I].

While this ring was sold in the stores in the early game, it held an exceptional effect of "raise light element attack power by 15% and lower dark element attack power by 80%".

By the way, the "I" of course indicated that it was an item in a series, and as the number increases to II or III, the effect also becomes more powerful. For IV the effect apparently raises light element attack power by 60% while lowering dark element

attack power by 50%, becoming something that could probably be quite useful.

Well, when it gets to IV it won't be sold in shops, and of course I had no intentions of looking for something like that anyways.

Without hesitating, I picked [Ring of Light I] up. It wasn't something that I needed right now since I hadn't learned any elemental attacks yet, but it's sure to come in handy in the future.

(Actually, nevermind about elemental attacks, I probably don't really need rings for a while…)

I did not plan on removing the stamina rings I had on for a while. Since only two rings could be equipped at once, any more would be… wait?

Slightly caught on something, I walked over to Train Girl, and asked in a small voice,

"Hey. What happens if you put on more than two rings?"

"Huh?"

I don't think it was such a weird question.

However, Train Girl's eyes turned round,

"You know, you can't put on more than two rings."

and replied with an answer that wasn't much of an answer.

"That's not what I mean, I'm wondering what happens if you try to put another one on."

“Eh? You know, you can’t put on more than two rings.”

…What’s going on? Suddenly Train Girl had become like a broken NPC.

Still, just what would happen?

In the game, equipping had to be done through the menu, so it was not possible to put on more equipment than the number of slots available. However, in this world where equipment was worn manually by hand, I felt as if that limit might be able to be ignored.

(Well, I guess I can just try it myself.)

After seeking permission from the shopkeeper, I took a [Ring of Water] and tried putting it on my finger.

“…Huh?”

As the ring neared my finger, a mysterious power activated and pushed the ring away… was what I had thought would happen, but nothing like that happened. The third ring easily slipped onto my finger.

It was so easy that it felt disappointing.

“Somehow, I seem to be able to just normally wear it…”

Saying this, I showed Train Girl my fingers, and,

“W-What are you doing, Souma!”

she was extremely surprised. More than that, she was almost fuming.

“You can’t put on more than two rings!”

Even if you say that, I’m already wearing them.

Still, it was possible that even if I wore it its effect wouldn’t activate.

“Let’s see, Water!”

Pointing towards the floor, I ordered the Water magic.

“Uwahh!?”

As I did so, a stream of water gushed out towards the floor.

It hit the ground at full force,

“S-Sir! Please don’t wet the floor!”

and drenched the floor of the shop.

It wasn’t the case in the game world, but it seemed like in this world after you use water magic, the water remains.

Touching the remaining water did not seem to inflict any damage, so it was no longer part of the attack, but in any case it was annoying.

What was annoying? Mostly, cleaning it up was annoying. Also, the sharp gaze of the shopkeeper was annoying.

I wished this world would stop it with this half-baked realism.

(Well, regardless of that, the effects of the ring had activated.)

However, based only on this, it was possible that one of the other rings could have lost its effect.

Further taking [Ring of Fire] and [Ring of Wind], I asked the shopkeeper.

“Excuse me, I’d also like to test these out. Ah, don’t worry, I’ll make sure to use the magic outside.”

From the results of the various experiments I then performed, I learned that it was possible to wear one ring on each finger for a total of ten rings, and the effects of all of the rings were active.

But, unfortunately it didn’t seem to be possible to wear two rings on the same finger.

When a ring is equipped onto a finger, it automatically adjusts its size to fit, but when a second ring is placed onto that same finger, in exchange for equipping the second ring, the first comes loose.

Though strange, it was a development that fit my needs perfectly. I hypothesized that this must be what happened when the game setting of “only two rings can be equipped” clashed with the common sense of the real world of “you can put on as many rings as you want”.

Thinking back, it would seem that some of the game’s rules were not implemented as physical limitations in this world, but rather by controlling people’s actions.

Just like making Reinhart want to give me a ride to town on his wagon, and just like how Train Mode made Train Girl want to run around in the same field I was in, could it be that the people of this world were just somehow made to not want to equip a third ring?

I mean, the behavior that putting on a second ring onto the same finger causes the rings to swap is the same as in the game. However, trying to put on a third ring is something that could not be done in the game, but something that was more than possible in reality, so in order to do something about this contradiction, the idea that "it's impossible to put on a third ring" was implanted into the consciousness of people. These were my thoughts.

I have no idea whether this hypothesis is correct, but, well, this was a buggy world filled with contradictions already anyways. With that, I forcibly made myself accept it.

However, isn't it human nature to want to test a few more things if this were the case?

Next I tried testing the other types of accessories, and while only one accessory could be equipped to the head just like in the game, I found that bracelets could be equipped on both wrists, so one on the head, two on the wrists, and ten on the fingers, I learned that a total of thirteen accessories could be equipped at once. This was simply amazing.

Is there any way of somehow getting Train Girl to accept this insight?

“Train Girl, are you wearing any rings?”

As I asked, she held out her right hand in front of my eyes.

“Ah, yeah. These.”

On her right hand, she was properly wearing two rings.

“These are?”

Even I didn’t have all of the equipment in Nekomimineko memorized. While trying to recall what these rings were, Train Girl answered, seeming somewhat proud.

“This one is the defense up ring that I bought here, but this other one is not sold in shops, and reduces magic damage taken by 30%.”

“Ohhhh…”

As expected of Train Girl, wearing something that was quite good for being at the first town.

“It’s a memento of my father… My father died when I was young, and most of his possessions had already been cleaned out. This ring was the only one that my mother was able to keep…”

And as expected of Train Girl, it did not come without a heavy story.

“Th-Then, just as a test. Won’t you consider trying to put on one more ring?”

At this rate, a Train Girl Sad Memories convention might end up starting. I hurriedly interrupted Train Girl's story with this suggestion.

"Eh? B-But, you can't put on…"

"Don't worry. Just maybe, it might be possible, you know?"

I pressed on the reluctant Train Girl.

"See, this is just another one of my experiments. You said you'd help me with them, didn't you?"

"That's, yes. B-But, this is… ah."

Still reluctant, Train Girl stared at her hands, and,

"I-I'll try it. Please!"

suddenly seeming to make up her mind, she held out her left hand towards me.

"Eh? You want me to put it on?"

I asked in surprise, and Train Girl nodded as if it needn't be said.

(Oh man…)

The act of putting a ring onto someone else's finger made me remember a certain traumatic event without fail. Still, I couldn't cancel an experiment that I had requested myself.

With no choice, I took another one of the same defense up rings that she owned, and moved it towards her left hand.

(…Ah)

Whether due to nervousness or if I had rushed it too much, as I brought the ring towards Train Girl's left hand, her hand slipped slightly to the side.

Because of that, the ring happened to align just perfectly with Train Girl's ring finger.

(This might be a bit problematic.)

If I remembered correctly, this world also had the custom of placing the wedding ring on the ring finger of the left hand.

Feeling a stinging pain from the thoughts of marriage, I tried to casually move the ring towards her pinky finger…

-Slip.

Just as I was about to put it on, Train Girl's hand once again moved to the side, moving the ring in front of her ring finger.

(I-It must be a coincidence.)

Once more, I tried to put the ring onto Train Girl's pinky finger…

-Slip.

It wasn't a coincidence! The movement of Train Girl's hand was obviously aiming for something, as it tried to guide the ring onto her ring finger.

"Umm, could you hurry it up?"

For some reason, I felt an overwhelming pressure coming from Train Girl.

(W-Well, I'm the one who requested it, so I have no choice, right?)

So, though it wasn't like I had lost, I resigned myself and slipped the ring onto her ring finger.

The ring fit itself perfectly to Train Girl's finger, as if it had been made for her. A-Ah, that was due to the magic within the ring, and there was no particular meaning behind it.

"S-See, even with a third one, everything's just fine."

Hiding my inner turmoil, I deliberately acted indifferent and said that.

But, Train Girl was silent. However, after a while, as if she had just been holding her breath,

"I-I can't do it anymore! Something just doesn't feel right!"

she quickly pulled off the ring on her finger.

…Except, it wasn't the ring I had put onto her left hand, but one of the rings that was originally on her right hand.

Then, immediately,

"Excuse me, I would like to buy this! Can you please ring me up!"

"No, wa…!"

she asked to buy the ring from the shopkeeper.

It all happened in a flash, without giving me any chance to stop it. Glancing at the ring on her ring finger,

"B-By doing this, it's almost like we're, e-engaged, isn't it?"

“Wh-, you!”

My words weren’t even words anymore. I didn’t think that she was someone who would say something like that.

But, seeing my flustered self, a chuckle slipped out of Train Girl. She lightly waved her hand, as if it were all a joke.

“I’m just kidding, just kidding. Even I hadn’t thought that far yet.”

So just how far have you thought?

Toying with me in a rare turn of events, Train Girl quickly finished up her purchase, and while caressing the ring, said.

“But still, haven’t you ever wanted to get married? At least a bit?”

At those words that almost made me involuntarily feel dizzy, I…

“–No, not at all. I will never, never marry anyone in this world.”

strongly, strongly, rejected them.

–The marriage system.

This was one of the main selling points of Nekomimineko when they abandoned the MMO idea. But at the same time, it was this game’s biggest trap, incomparable with things like the Lizardmen’s Trap or Train Girl…

And it was also the biggest reason for why I had started playing Nekomimineko solo.

Extra.

NekomiminekoWiki ››› “Event Danger Ranks”

※These ranks and explanations are meant only as a reference.

E

This is a normal event.
Savor its precious normalcy as you clear it.

D

An uncooperative event which is difficult to clear.
However, this is standard for Nekomimineko.

C

Careful attention must be paid to this event.
In certain situations, it may become impossible to complete or even negatively impact further gameplay.

B

An event that must be avoided.
It may be impossible to clear with legitimate methods, or may make it difficult to clear the story.

A

An event that must be avoided at all costs.
If encountered, there is a high chance that further game progress will become impossible.

S

If you save after this event occurs, it will become impossible to progress in the game.

Even if you save before, it is possible that it may already be unavoidable.

SS
It's okay, there's still hope! …Is all that you can tell yourself.

SSS++
To be~ able~ to play~ this~ amazing~ game~ from the~ start~ again~
Aren't~ you~ the most~ fortunate~ person~ in the~ world!!

Chapter 5 – The Blessing of Nekomimineko.

Part 1.

When we arrived at the capital, Lichter, close to a month of in-game time had passed.

We steadily raised our levels, and reached a strength where we could proudly call ourselves intermediate adventurers.

In addition to gaining levels, more importantly my skill as a player had also increased. Especially big was that I had completely mastered the timing for the short cancel of Step.

I had become able to chain Step short cancel into skills other than Slash. I had the confidence that with our current skills, we could defeat monsters that we had a hard time with back when we were at Ramlich without taking even a single hit.

What's more, our party had grown. For a while after I started there were just two of us, but now it had become a four member party. At first I thought I wasn't made out to be fighting in a party, but my coordination with them had become quite smooth, and now it had become a given for the four of us to fight together.

I had slowly come to grasp the personalities of our two new members, and now, never mind their tendencies in battle, I could even recite the contents of their mutterings when they were idling.

The warrior Eddie was one of them. He was a front-liner, and acted as both an attacker and a tank for the party.

Eddie was originally a broadsword user, a rarity in New Communicate Online, and on top of that, I'd say he was more suited to attacking than defending. However, that wouldn't work out in the long run, so I forcefully toughened his equipment and made him a tank, meaning that I gave him the role of being a shield.

On the other hand, Merlin was the opposite of Eddie, a complete back-line type. As a pure glass-cannon character, she unfortunately could not do anything other than shoot out offensive magic from the back, nor was she expected to do anything else.

Though she was extremely weak to physical attacks and was completely useless when her MP ran out, her magical attacks

were the strongest weapons of our party. I felt like she made our training at least twice as efficient.

Finally…

“Is something the matter, Souma?”

The one who called out to me with her kind voice was my very first companion, and the character that I loved the most from this game.

Of course, for anyone, their first companion would be someone special, and I was no exception. It might not be an exaggeration to say that half of the reason I became addicted to this world was because she was here.

Naturally, she was just an NPC, and not an actual human. Though I knew she was only saying that because her AI had detected that I had been silent and stationary for a while, I still felt my heart leap on hearing her voice.

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

Pretending to ignore those feelings, I replied to her.

She was, of course,

“Shall we go? …Tieru.”

my first ally in this game, Tieru Lentia.

She was single-handedly in charge of healing in the party, and I had been helped by her a lot. There had been plenty of situations where the party would have been wiped out if not for her. As a healer, she slowly started to lag behind in levels, but that didn't matter. Her existence within me grew larger by the day.

Today, my relationship with her was about to undergo a change.

–Today was supposed to be a memorable day, for both Tieru and myself.

Tieru was a friendable NPC in the town of Ramlich, working in the infirmary.

Though resting in town would slowly recover HP and MP, when going out hunting multiple times in a day there was no time for waiting around that long.

For that purpose there was the infirmary. By paying the currency of this world, Elements, it was possible to recover HP and MP in a short amount of time.

Tieru was an apprentice healer there, and if you visited during specific times, she would offer to treat you in place of the doctor.

Her treatment did not differ much from the doctor's, but there was an event that gave a peek into her personality. When visiting the infirmary without any money, the normal doctor would just kick you out, but when it's Tieru, she would give you treatment in exchange for an item, or even for free.

It was only when I became closer with her that I found out that in those cases she would pay the fee with her own money. Paying for it in addition to healing them, her kindness was slightly unbelievable.

Tieru was really a saint.

You might think that there is no point in getting so attached to a fictional character, but I don't agree with that.

In the end, the true winner of a game is the one who had the most fun. To me, rather than thinking of NPCs as NPCs, it was much more enjoyable to play through while emotionally interacting with them as if they were humans.

At the very least, even if her mind and body were fake, my feelings of happiness when Tieru called to me with her kind words were real.

However, even though Tieru was so wonderful, she wasn't a super popular character from the game as a whole.

From the official webpage, the very first popularity contest after the game's release had a joke character, Train Girl, take the top of both the most popular and least popular rankings. Well, I had experienced her traumatic Train Event once too, and a character with such impact was undoubtedly going to be prominent.

I bet she's going to drop straight to tenth or twentieth in the next popularity contest.

That said, even if that happened, it would probably still be hard for Tieru to become first place.

In the first popularity contest, Tieru ranked 7th. With a spot like that and more and more characters still to appear as people progress in the game, it would be tough to aim for first.

From the comments, there were things saying that her character overlapped with that of sister Marielle or that she was just a worse Marielle or that she couldn't beat Marielle in either abilities or in breasts, basically lots of things comparing her to the sister in the church, but these people just had no eye for judging.

Her charm points were her kind, all-encompassing heart, and a trait that none of the other characters had.

–A very unique trait, in that her aesthetics sense was warped!

Characters in this game had what was called affinity points, and as these increase, their speech and actions would become more friendly, and the chance of special events happening increased.

As part of that system, when a character's affinity points reach a certain level, they would tell you the things that they like, and in Tieru's case, of all the things… she told me that she liked the magical staff Guernica.

Guernica was a staff that seemed to have been designed as the condensation of all of the world's suffering and anger into the shape of a staff, and only a single copy of it was stored in the magic shop in Ramlich. Even with the design like that, I wouldn't

have hesitated to buy it if Tieru wanted it, but it was priced at 49000E. Unfortunately, for broke adventurers like us who couldn't even afford to board the Skyboat, it was far out of our reach.

Promising to myself that I would definitely buy it when we return to this town, we left Ramlich via carriage, and made it here, to the capital Richter.

Of course, to us who are now on track to being intermediate adventurers, though 49000E wasn't quite loose change, it definitely wasn't an outlandish sum. I decided that I would definitely buy it and give it to her as a present the next time we return to Ramlich, but before that I had an important challenge ahead of me.

(Today will be the day that I propose to Tieru!!)

In other words, I would be asking for her hand in marriage today.

From the official announcements, a character would tell the player what they liked when their affection points reached 80. Then, when their affection points exceeded 100, surprisingly the characters would answer the player's proposal.

That's right, in other words, it was a marriage event.

The marriage system was one of the selling points of New Communicate Online, and most of the main characters that were likely to be popular could be proposed to.

Of course, even after marriage, since this was an all-ages game there was not much extra you could do, but naturally you would think that it'd still be nice to marry the character that you liked.

By the way, according to the official information, in this world there was no gender discrimination, and whether male or female or loli or shota or elderly or a slug, as long as the marriage flag was flipped, it was possible to get married without any problems.

It seemed to me that this was far beyond the level of not discriminating on gender, but put another way, it meant that no matter how hard you tried it would be impossible to marry someone whose marriage flag had not been flipped. However, I knew that Tieru was able to be married. It doesn't really matter, but it seemed that both Eddie and Merlin, as well as the popularity ranking number one character Train Girl, were all characters that could be married.

Also, not that I have even the tiniest of intentions to propose to anyone else, but within the game's limitations there was no particular problem in multiple marriages, and it was possible to propose to as many people as you wanted.

In the developer comments, they had written: "There is something like a small exploitation prevention event in place, but in general you can do as you wish. Feel free to create the harem of your dreams with anyone and everyone, lol." It does make one feel like this is giving a bit too much freedom.

That said, marriage does have an actual benefit with regards to the game, as it seems that the player will be able to use a part of the skills and abilities of their marriage partners.

What's more, it was written on the official site that "there may exist skills that cannot be obtained without completing a proposal event." Since multiple marriages were possible in this game, there was no reason to avoid marriage events.

However, every good deal has a catch.

Especially in this game filled with countless bugs and as many deplorable events, there was no doubt about that.

Taking into account the dreadfulness of the quests, Mikhail's Bluebird and The Labyrinth of Sacrifice, that we had recently completed, there was no way they would honestly prepare such a favorable event. My hunch was that this marriage event would come with a huge risk.

Looking at the explanations for the marriage event, it would seem that this event is a one-time challenge, with the possibility that once failed, it would be impossible to challenge again.

To begin with, the proposal event could only take place near a monolith. This was said to be so that the god could witness the vows of marriage in the instruction booklet, but that was definitely a lie.

After all, just a few lines earlier, this was written.

“Warning: regardless of the event’s results, it is impossible to retry. Once the proposal event has been initiated, the game will automatically save.”

Possibly a remnant from the time this game was an MMO, there was only one save slot for the game. It was more or less impossible to create a backup of the data.

Of course, by messing with the VR machine itself it might be possible to do so, but I won’t use such backhanded tricks. In that case, this upcoming proposal event would really be a singular moment of truth.

And, the fact that this game required saving after the proposal event was, by my hypothesis, because once failed, something horrible that would make one want to reset would probably happen.

There were three conditions to successfully completing the proposal event.

First, a ring accessory must be prepared, and placed onto the finger of the partner.

After doing so and saying a preset keyword, it changes to the confession phase.

Here the player confesses, and if the partner’s affinity points are above 100, the confession succeeds.

At this point, it will finally be possible to marry them.

However, this meant that if their affinity points were not above 100, then the confession would fail. I felt like there was a big trap waiting there.

In a normal game, it would be possible to try multiple times even if the confession fails. The only thing that could possibly be a penalty would be something like losing a few affinity points at most.

But, there was no way that there would be only such a small penalty in New Communicate Online.

There was the possibility that it was simply that it would be impossible to try again if you fail, but the worst case situation that I could think of, where failing the proposal would remove the character from your party, was, unthinkable as it may be, not beyond what New Communicate Online might do.

With the chance of something like that happening, this was an event that I could not afford to fail.

It had already been three weeks since I had heard about what Tieru liked. If her affinity had been growing at same rate since then, then by now it should have long exceeded 100.

I wanted to believe that I can't fail.

Emotions in turmoil, I arrived in front of the monolith.

"Bringing me all the way here, is something happening?"

As if reflecting her personality, with a calm expression, Tieru said.

Her long black hair swayed in the wind.

Even though she's a game character, because she's a game character, I found her beautiful.

–With that, I made up my mind.

"[I have something important to tell you]."

Seizing the chance, I spoke the keyword.

However,

"…?"

Tieru had no visible reaction.

Could I have messed up the keyword?

I panicked for a moment, then quickly realized my mistake.

I had reversed the ordering.

I needed to first put the ring on Tieru, and then say those words.

(Calm down, calm down. This is just a game.)

Steadying my breathing, I loosened my body. Then, I held out the ring towards her.

"This is…?"

"It's a present."

I had splurged a bit, and bought the most expensive ring in the capital.

With my own hands, I put that onto her ring finger. In preparation for this moment, I already had her unequip one of her rings.

“A present!? My, thank you very much!”

“N-No problem.”

While Tieru’s AI still managed to show a natural reaction no different from that of a human even under these limited circumstances, I took a deep breath.

“Tieru. [I have something important to tell you].”

Once more, I spoke the keywords which indicated the start of a proposal.

This time, Tieru looked at me with a surprised expression.

“Again, is something the matter?”

She had on her familiar gentle smile. Seeing that smile, I finally said it.

“Tieru. I [love] you. Please [marry] me.”

The words [love] and [marry] were the keywords, and anything containing these becomes a proposal.

From now on, there was nothing I could do except pray, and wait for her reply.

(…How, was it?)

The silence was suffocating.

Then, slowly, her mouth opened.

Her reply was…

“Yes, with pleasure!”

A large smile plastered her face.

Seeing that, all the strength left my body. I had been worried about everything, but it seems to have been all for naught.

But, this was not the time to relax. Though the greatest obstacle has passed, this was only the halfway point of the marriage event. We still had to finish the ceremony by swearing our marriage to the god.

“Then, the words of vow.”

“Yes.”

Our eyes met for a moment, then we both turned to face ahead, and made our vow in front of the god.

“I, Sagara Souma, and…”

“Tieru Lentia…”

“”Swear our eternal love by the name of our true god Laedistus.””

The moment the words left our mouths.

“W-What’s going on?”

Three things happened simultaneously.

On the edge of my vision the message “the game has been saved” popped up, a ray of light descended from the sky, and in my head I heard a voice.

《I congratulate you! Truly, congratulations.》

A deep, reverberating voice, offered us their blessing.

No animosity could be felt from their tone, but there was a sense of pressure, of majesty or something.

《I offer my blessings for thy wondrous love.》

It couldn’t be, god’s voice! Or so it felt like.

It seems that when the marriage event succeeds, it switches into a cutscene like this.

As I was feeling impressed by the elaborate setup,

《I offer my blessings, as the true god to descend upon these lands, as The Demon Lord Of The End, minion of the Demon God Dis Aster!》

“…Eh?”

What I heard made me doubt my ears.

Understanding the meaning of those words, I reflexively tried to protect Tieru, but at that time it was already too late for anything.

《Then, to begin with, I offer the bride the blessing of immortality.》

A single bolt of lightning suddenly exploded from the sky, striking Tieru's body.

"Tieru!"

I screamed out, but was unable to run over to her.

(Spectator mode!? I can't move my body!!)

Before I realized, the freedom of my body had been claimed by the system. During special events, there are times when the game enters spectator mode and the player's movements are sealed. However, this was the first time I had felt so frustrated by this.

《And to the groom, I offer the blessing of a love that persists through eternity.》

Hearing those words, I unconsciously stiffened my immobile body, but nothing noticeable happened.

Did the blessing have no effect because I was a player?

However, I had no time to think.

《You are welcome. These are the blessings of the lord of demons, ones impossible to break by human hands! You children of men! Rejoice at my blessings, and work hard for the sake of the great Dis Aster!》

Leaving only those words and a loud cackling laughter, the presence of the Demon Lord disappeared.

At the same time, in the edge of my vision, the message “you have learned a new skill” showed up.

When the sky returned to normal and the laughter faded, my body had also regained motion.

“Tieru!”

I dashed over to Tieru, who hadn’t moved one step since the start, possibly frozen by fear.

Forgetting that she was an NPC, I desperately clung onto her body. But, when I touched her, I became speechless.

…She was hard.

She felt cold and hard, as if I was touching glass.

“Wh, at, what, is…”

On top of that, no matter how hard I pushed or pulled, she wouldn’t move one bit. There was no reaction, as if time had been frozen for her. An ominous thought flashed through my head.

(Think. Remember. What did that voice say?)

That’s right, I believe it was [immortality].

A chill ran down my spike. Unable to move, eternally unchanging, that was indeed immortality.

(So, it was because of that [blessing] that Tieru had become unable to move!?)

If that's the case, then it was only a blessing in name. In actuality, she would have had been cursed.

"That's right! Nectar!"

I remembered the existence of the panacea that I had obtained just one of in our previous adventures. Retrieving it from my pouch where I had stored it just in case,

"Move! Please move, Tieru!"

I threw it against the frozen Tieru. The nectar had definitely been applied to Tieru.

However,

"Why, why did it not work!!"

Tieru stayed frozen.

The supposedly all-curing nectar had no effect. The nectar was supposed to be superior to all healing magic or techniques that a player could have. If even that was useless, then there was nothing else I could do.

"What is this, I can't believe it! Even if it's an event, this is too unreasonable…!"

Yelling, I shook Tieru's body.

Parts on her body could not move. However, the location of her entire body could be moved.

“Just wait a little bit. I’ll have you cured soon.”

Carrying her body, I headed to the church.

Even if I can’t do anything about it, maybe someone else could.

The church was a place that cured status abilities and broke curses. In addition, the priest there, Father Gratia, was involved in many events, and likely a strong hidden force of this game. The specifics of his backstory hadn’t come out yet, but I believed him to be something like a retired veteran adventurer.

With the conviction that he would be able to do something about this, I opened the door to the church while carrying Tieru, and,

“You’re, kidding…”

was shocked at the sight.

In a posture as if he were preaching, Father Gratia stood, frozen. At one glance I could tell that it was the same condition as Tieru.

(No way, could he have done in anyone who might have been able to cure this!?)

Desperately trying to calm my confusion, I ran out of the church.

For the moment, I need to bring Tieru somewhere safe first.

With only that one thought in mind, I ran through the town. In the corner of my mind, I knew that there was nothing that could harm Tieru in her current state, but I just wanted to bring her somewhere where I could feel reassured.

“For now, for now I should meet up with everyone…”

Dragging Tieru's frozen body, I headed to the inn.

"Sir?"

As I entered the inn, the inn's attendant welcomed me with a startled voice.

Normally, I might've found this slightly aggravating, but this time I was truly relieved. In the capital's inn, there were people who were perfectly capable of moving.

(I'm glad. It seems to be fine inside the inn.)

I had almost collapsed there, overcome by relief, but I forced my body onwards, towards our room.

–It's okay.

–I can still go on.

–Even Tieru might still be able to be cured.

I'll regroup with Eddie and Merlin, come up with a plan, and then…

"Eddie! Merlin! It's horrible, Tieru has…"

Opening the door, I called out to Eddie and Merlin, and finally noticed the abnormality. Since I had entered the room, neither of them showed any response.

"No way!?"

I quickly scampered over to the two of them, and shook their bodies.

…They were cold.

It was as if they were no longer living beings. A cold and hard feeling transmitted back through my fingers.

Shaking, I staggered backwards.

“Why? Why, not just Tieru, but also Eddie and Merlin?”

I couldn’t understand it. It didn’t make logical sense.

The curse of the Demon Lord’s blessings should’ve had only been applied to the two of us.

So, why…

(Wait, a second. What he said to me, “I offer the blessing of a love that persists through eternity”…)

A love that persists through eternity, could also mean to never cheat.

However, it didn’t seem to have any effect on me. In that case, who was the curse targeting?

(He couldn’t have, cursed every single character that could be married, could he?)

There’s no way! Such an event devoid of common sense that destroys the entire game from the roots would be absurd!

Nonetheless, I had already come to accept that hypothesis. Eddie and Merlin could not very well be called important characters, but they were characters that could be married.

And though I have no confirmation, Father Gratia didn't feel like just a simple mob character. He must have also been one of the characters that could be married.

"Damn it! Damn it all!"

Once more, this time alone, I walked towards the monolith.

My goal this time was not Tieru.

I just wanted to undo all of this.

The monolith came into sight. The moment I ran inside, I yelled out with all my might.

"Load!"

Yelling this, I chose to load the game data from the menu.

Immediately, my save data was loaded. For a moment, my field of view grew dark…

"Yes, with pleasure!"

In front of my eyes was Tieru with her usual smile. I let out a sigh of relief.

Just by seeing her smile gently at me, it felt as if I had woken up from a nightmare. I felt my tension dissipate.

However, I needed to stop this.

If I don't do something, she'll once again receive the Demon Lord's curse and be frozen in time.

It would probably be fine as long as we don't say the words of vow, but this was a game whose depravity knew no depths. I couldn't relax with just that. I should move Tieru away from this place as quickly as possible.

I tried to tell that to Tieru.

(Tieru, we need to run, right…)

"Then, the words of vow."

Yet, what came from my mouth was the exact opposite.

From my mouth? …That wasn't quite accurate.

It was a recording. The words that I had said before were just being played back.

"Yes."

However, on hearing that, Tieru happily nodded.

I wanted to stop it, but my body stuck in spectator mode would not move one bit.

Even though I wasn't saying anything, the event selfishly progressed onwards.

"I, Sagara Souma, and…"

"Tieru Lentia…"

""Swear our eternal love by the name of our true god Laedistus.""

The voices of Tieru and myself, followed by the resounding voice of the Demon Lord.

《I congratulate you! Truly, congratulations.》

What followed did not change.

The Demon Lord appeared and froze the time of Tieru, as well as many of the people in the town.

As all that happened, I could do nothing but stand there and watch.

When everything ended, and Tieru, once more frozen into a statue, entered my eyes,

“Ha, haha…”

I finally understood everything.

This, this here was the true trap behind New Communicate Online’s marriage event.

Automatically saving was not to prevent the player from avoiding the penalties of failing the marriage event. It was so that they could not escape from the blessings of the Demon Lord when they succeed with the marriage. It was what the developers had come up with, the worst possible trap.

“Haha, hahahahaha…”

As a result, I had lost everything. My beloved partner, and the party members who had up to now journeyed with me through pain and pleasure.

And, it became impossible to enlist the help of any notable NPCs having a marriage event.

"…itting."

Unconsciously, words spilled out from my mouth. But they were no doubt the screams of my heart.

"–I'm quitting this shitty game!!"

Logging out, I immediately deleted the data of New Communicate Online, wrapped myself in my blanket, and went to sleep.

…This was from around a year before I was pulled into the world of the game.

It was a story from back when this game hadn't even been nicknamed Nekomimineko, from when I had still truly enjoyed playing this game.

It was also a story of why I had become a solo player.

Part 2.

Inside the accessory shop.

Having recalled an unpleasant memory, I grimaced.

The proposal event and the most horrible event that followed it, Demon Lord's Blessing, were even now one of my traumas.

Even if a proposal succeeds, it did not equal marriage. That was the bad nature of this game, and what made Nekomimineko Nekomimineko.

Successfully propose before defeating the Demon Lord, and through the Demon Lord's blessings, not just the character that you proposed to, but all of the characters that could potentially be married would be turned into inanimate statues.

Of course, there was no way to imagine that such a horrible event would happen when proposing, so the players that hadn't received information about this in advance from the internet or other sources would undoubtedly fall into this trap, be surprised, despair, and then become furious.

The responses were such that some online forums had even set up dedicated threads to complain about this event.

It might have been understandable if this was the penalty for failing the proposal, but having something like this after succeeding? And to make it irreversible even by resetting, this was on a completely different dimension from being a bad joke.

As it is, I was also someone who had fallen for this. I generally tried to avoid looking at event information before clearing them, and so I was splendidly caught by this trap.

At the time, due to the extreme shock, I impulsively deleted my save data and ended up not touching Nekomimineko for three

whole days. …Said another way, I had picked myself up by the fourth day and started the game once again from the very beginning.

Still, the shock had lingered, and turned into trauma. This was the reason that I had mostly played solo.

However, while this Demon Lord's Blessing event had created a hell out of Nekomimineko players' agonizing cries, within the eight Event Danger Ranks in the NekominekoWiki, it was only classified as a C, as the third least dangerous rank.

When asked why, three reasons were given.

- It is still possible to complete the story as a solo player (after a certain patch).
- It is simple to avoid the event with prior knowledge.
- The resolution to the event is very straightforward, and there were no hidden strings attached.

Let's explain these one by one.

To begin, with respect to the first point, the effect of this event was no more than merely being unable to use most of the helper characters.

Most of the characters in stores were normal NPCs unrelated to any events, in other words mob characters, so there was no problem with using the stores. In addition, story events were made to be completable (after a certain patch) even if many of the characters had been frozen by this event.

Since a practiced Nekomimineko player would probably be able to somehow clear the game solo, this event couldn't be said to be game-breaking.

Well, to be perfectly precise, during version 1.00 triggering that marriage event in the early game causes the game to become unclearable and creates many other problems, so it was an event that was dangerous to trigger. However, there were many other events that caused even worse bugs to occur, so even at that time this event wasn't much of a problem.

It might be hard to imagine, so as an example the ridiculously named dungeon Mino-tan's Great Labyrinth was much worse than this in terms of pure risk.

As this dungeon's name implies, it was a giant maze, and to help you, there was a special quest item that could be used to randomly change the maze, but until version 1.11 there was no way of refilling the number of times this item could be used.

Normally, this wouldn't be a problem, but unfortunately randomly changing the maze sometimes results in a situation where no paths to the exit exists. Together with the fact that there was a save point in the dungeon's rest area meant that a tragedy was waiting to happen.

Thus, if when the number of available uses of the quest item drops to 0, and the maze is such that there was no route to the exit, and furthermore the player then saves, it becomes

impossible to leave the maze, and the player becomes completely trapped.

At this point, the only choices left to the player are either to wander the maze for eternity searching for an exit that was impossible to reach, or to delete their save data and start over from the very beginning.

It was quite sad.

Since there was a bug that could make it impossible to clear the game, this quest, commonly referred to as Mino-tan's Custodian Trap, was awarded a rank B before the patch.

With the patch, the ability to refill the number of uses of the quest item was added, so its current rank was a D.

Anyways, about the second reason, this Demon Lord's Blessing event would not activate if the player doesn't propose, so just by knowing about it beforehand this landmine could be completely avoided. This was like the Lizardman's Trap, a type of trap called a First-Time Killer, which in other words means someone experienced could avoid it while whistling.

Compared to the dust tornado feared as The Sudden-Death Game That Blows Across The Desert that was almost unevadable and appears without warning while walking through the desert as part of a story quest that couldn't be avoided in order to clear the game, this could be said to be much less dangerous.

Finally, the resolution to this event was simple and straightforward.

Purposely having the Demon Lord name himself, and even dropping a hint like “impossible to break by human hands”, it could be deduced that the way to break this “blessing” was to defeat the last boss, the Demon Lord Of The End.

In the midst of eviler and eviler quests from the mid game onwards, ones whose resolutions were so clear-cut were quite rare.

For example, the quest Mikhael’s Bluebird in the capital Lichter had great conditions of being bug-free, having no fighting, and having good rewards, but due to its overly twisted nature it had been specially designated as a C-rank.

This quest starts with Mikhael’s mother’s request to search for a bluebird with a strange power for the sake of the sick Mikhael, but the quest was not quite what it might seem.

As you bring back items that seem beneficial to Mikhael’s health from around the town, Mikhael slowly starts to get better, and eventually Mikhael presents you with a bluebird’s feather, saying that he picked it up in the garden.

At that point, you might think that the quest is progressing well and continue curing Mikhael’s sickness, but as a result of that finally Mikhael becomes healthy, and you fail the quest.

In order to clear this quest, you have to go around town and bring back items that *seem like they would be bad* for Mikhael’s health.

As you do so, Mikhael gradually becomes weaker, and after repeating this many times, finally you discover the corpse of a dead bluebird on Mikhael's bed.

There, the shocking truth that Mikhael was actually "a bluebird that became the woman's son for the sake of the woman who lost her son" is revealed.

Just FYI, after that,

"Since I promised, here's the reward. But, don't ever show yourself in front of me again. …If it was going to end up like this, I shouldn't have given you that request to begin with."

Mikhael's mother says, and you clear the quest. I swear that whoever created this quest is definitely a demon or something.

Well, comparing with something like that, this Demon Lord's Blessing event was really quite straightforward. Sure this event was a big obstacle in getting married, but defeating the Demon Lord turns everything back into the way it was, and if the marriage event was started after the Demon Lord was already defeated then the Demon Lord's Blessing event wouldn't even trigger.

The producer comment that there was free marriage and a harem could even be created was in fact not a lie.

But why was there a need to defeat the Demon Lord before being able to marry? Trying my best to put myself in the game producers' shoes, they might've wanted to say something like this.

“If you have the time to marry someone then why don’t you go clear the game.”

To which, the players’ response would undoubtedly be.

“Then why don’t you just say it straight!”

At the very least, that’s what I wanted to say.

Well, who knows what the truth is. One well promoted hypothesis was that this event was created from the wrath of an unpopular Nekomimineko staff who couldn’t get married, but either way, in the end this event had become accepted by most of the Nekomimineko players.

I mean, the only people who would play this game so long after its release date would either be Nekomimineko players who had already been trained not to be surprised at something like this, or those who had heard that Nekomimineko was a horrible game and decided to play just because of that. In either case, there weren’t any people left who would complain about something of this level.

For example, if the current me had triggered this trap, I might think welp, here we go again, but I wouldn’t be so shocked as to stop playing.

“Well, whatever… I wonder if you can steal items from frozen characters.”

In such a way, I would probably adapt in a few seconds and continue on playing. Get used to Nekomimineko and anyone would react similarly.

Sometimes a first-time player triggers this event and starts ranting in online forums, but gets dispersed with comments like “Something like that’s the default for Nekomimineko” or “Well, that’s the kind of game this is lol”. It became just an everyday thing.

This was a long explanation, but to sum it up in a sentence it would be something like this.

“The other events are also all kinds of bad, so people ended up not caring so much.”

It was really the worst reason.

That said, the Demon Lord’s Blessing event was cruel, and of the bug-free events it presented the player with extraordinarily large problems, and it caused much greater mental shock than other events.

However, even knowing that, there was quite a number of people who would purposely propose before defeating the Demon Lord and trigger this Demon Lord’s Blessing.

Of this event that was viewed as all negatives, there actually existed a rare skill that couldn’t be obtained except by triggering this event.

The special skill that is obtained when your most loved receives the Demon Lord's Blessing, called the Embodiment of Fury.

With a name that seemed representative of the furious player himself that had triggered this event, this rare skill held a power that was considered balance breaking even within this Nekomimineko.

The Embodiment of Fury was a solo only skill, where on top of being able to be used only once in 24 hours, it could not be used if there were friendlies nearby, in other words NPCs that were not enemies. However, in exchange for that, its effect was very extreme.

For 30 seconds after its activation, the player's base status values are all increased by 200%, but for the 30 seconds following that the player's base status values are all lowered to a hundredth. It was a skill that was in many ways extremely broken.

Since the target of the skill were base status values, bonuses from weapons or masteries weren't affected, but even then it was a more than potent ability. Magic that affected base status values were rare, and even top class magic could only increase the target's strength by 50% at the very most, so the effects of this skill could be said to be on a different level.

If I could learn this skill, then it would probably be of great help to surviving in this world. But, that didn't mean…

"U-um, sorry. Did I make you remember something that you didn't want to remember?"

that I would consider even for a second of turning a girl like Train Girl, with her head lowered in front of me, looking like she was about to cry, into an inanimate statue.

“Ahh, sorry. It’s not something that you need to worry about, Train Girl. It’s just…”

I had said that the Demon Lord’s Blessing event was still to this day a trauma for me, but what pulled on my heart was not the event itself, but rather the fact that I had erased the data afterwards.

I’ve thought many times that I shouldn’t have deleted the data there, and should have defeated the Demon Lord by myself, returning my companions, returning Tieru, back to normal.

Of course, I understood that NPCs were not actually alive, and that they did not actually have feelings.

However, even if their existence were fake, my feelings of wanting to have saved them were real.

I did not want to have such regrets ever again.

That’s why…

“I’ve decided that I definitely won’t marry anyone.”

Part 3.

“Huh, isn’t this a [communication ring]?”

Trying to break away from the delicate topic of marriage, I slightly exaggeratedly pointed at the ring that I had noticed in the shop.

A communication ring was, like its name implied, a ring that was used to communicate with someone over a distance. It might sound like quite a useful item, but there was not much point in talking with NPCs from far away, and to begin with the NPC AIs did not come with the thought pattern of using this item.

It was probably an item that was created during the time when Nekomimineko was being developed as an MMO.

While I had known of its existence, I had never used it in the game, but in this world where NPCs have become actual humans, it might have its uses.

“Do you know how to use this?”

I asked the shopkeeper, and was kindly taught its usage.

You register yourself by placing your finger on the jewel on the communication ring and saying your name. Afterwards, when someone else wears it, then touches the jewel on the ring with their other hand and shouts the registered name, a communication link is established. It seemed like there might be another way of using the ring with orders, but there wasn’t any need to try to figure that out.

Trying it out, I said my name, and handed the ring to Train Girl. After hesitating slightly, Train Girl swapped out the ring on her right hand, and called out my name while touching the ring.

“Umm… hello?”

As she did so, I was able to hear Train Girl’s voice as if she was talking right by my ear, even though we were separated by a few meters.

Mm, this was neat. But, what do I do if I want to talk to her?

“Excuse me, what do I…”

“Kyah!?”

Before I had finished my question, I had received my answer.

Train Girl had clasped her ears in surprise. It appears that while the link was open, she would hear my voice right beside her as well.

“T-This feels kinda weird. I can hear you twice, Souma.”

I also hear Train Girl’s voice twice, near my ear and from her mouth.

This was actually quite annoying. Trying not to disturb Train Girl too much, I lowered my voice.

“Uhm, how…”

“Eeeek!”

It seemed to have the opposite effect. With a small scream, Train Girl jumped up.

And since I heard that scream coming from beside my ear, it felt really strange. It almost seemed like some kind of strange play.

I never expected a mere communication ring to put us in such a pinch. How am I going to deal with this?

“How do you close the communication link?”

Hoping for a solution, I asked the shopkeeper.

Since I talked normally this time, Train Girl somehow managed to endure. Or rather, it seemed like she was desperately trying to hold back from screaming, as I could hear her rough breathing from right beside my ear. …It made me extremely uncomfortable.

It was my own fault for not finding out everything beforehand. I wanted to learn the way to cancel this as soon as possible.

Feeling my gaze full of anticipation, the shopkeeper made a troubled face.

“Actually, with that ring, once the link is established, there is no way to forcibly terminate it.”

“Ehh!”

“Ehhhh!?”

The two of us cried out at the same time, and our two bodies writhed at the same time.

This was quite a big problem.

“You, you mean, forever…”

I anxiously stuttered, but the shopkeeper shook his head apologetically.

“No, that would really be a bit too extreme. Just, um, I forgot to tell you this but…”

“Hmm?”

From the tone, it seemed like a solution did exist.

But then why was the shopkeeper wearing such a complicated expression?

“That ring is actually single use, and it breaks after three minutes.”

Just then, I heard a cracking sound, and turned around to see what had been a ring fall from Train Girl’s finger.

–Huh? Am I going to have to pay for this?

Luckily, we made a deal that by buying the one other communication ring from the store we didn’t have to compensate for the broken one.

Of course, the fault laid with us who had suddenly tried it on, but the shopkeeper admitted to forgetting to explain things ahead of time, or rather, since this was an item that was so rarely purchased, the shopkeeper had forgotten that it was single use until right before it broke.

I do think that it could be a useful item, but it may have inherited its unpopularity from when this was a game.

Considering that it was priced at a modest 1000E, even without the accident it could still be called a good deal. It shouldn't have been too bad for the shop either, since they were able to sell an item that wasn't selling at all.

I registered myself on the communication ring that was just purchased, and once again gave it to Train Girl.

Train Girl seemed to want to wear it immediately, but looking at her own fingers, she uttered "ah" and froze. I also looked over, and figured out what was making her hesitate.

She was currently wearing two rings. On her right hand was the ring she had just put back on, her father's memento, and on her left hand was the ring that she had me put on, so unless she removes one of them she can't put on the communication ring. Swapping it out for a moment was one thing, but she couldn't very well choose to remove the memento ring that gave high magic resistance.

As I was thinking that, in front of my eyes, Train Girl's hand reached towards the memento ring…

"Jeez. I can't believe you."

Before her hand could reach the ring, I pulled off the ring on her left hand ring finger.

"S-Souma!"

I heaved a sigh at the pouting Train Girl,

"Here, will this do?"

and replaced it with the communication ring.

Though I didn't want to do this because it reminded me of the marriage event, but oh well.

"Thank you, Souma!"

Train Girl's face lit up. I must also be a simpleton to feel glad for having done that after seeing her so.

“Ehehe, having Souma put a ring on me, it’s like a dream.”

“It’s just because you were trying to do something stupid…”

“It doesn’t matter. There’s no way I wouldn’t be happy when a person I like is being kind to me.”

She said this with such an innocent expression. Involuntarily, my heart skipped slightly.

“Y-You know, Train Girl, you shouldn’t say such things so easily. You’re bound to cause misunderstandings if it’s someone else…”

However, Train Girl just smiled at that.

“What are you saying, Souma. There’s no way I would say something like this to anyone other than you.”

“Eh, a-ahh… right.”

I had been surprised for a moment thinking that it was a confession, but Train Girl did not seem the least bit perturbed.

Which could only mean that she was saying this literally, something like “there’s no way anyone else would talk to a loner like me”.

I really can’t underestimate someone whose words have more destructive power without hidden meanings.

As I was trembling from the unexpected appearance of a formidable foe,

“Really, thank you very much. This is the first time I’ve gotten something like this from a man. I’ll treasure this my whole life!”

“Y-Yeah…”

Train Girl let out another attack.

This probably also meant something like “I have no friends so this is the first time I’ve gotten anything from someone other than my mother”, but even knowing that I felt light-headed.

Normally, I would’ve thrown in something like “don’t just treasure it, you should use it properly”, but, startled, I missed the timing.

…This was bad.

Right now, she was not Train Girl.

If I had to say, right now, Train Girl was none other than…

–A heroine!!

Since then, Train Girl’s evolution into a heroine showed no signs of slowing.

Having put on ten rings without thinking and only just realising that this would be quite conspicuous, she casually offered me some gloves, saying, “Here, if this is okay.”

Then, we went to the magic shop that I hadn’t had a chance to visit yet, and I couldn’t control myself and bought a large amount of the magic books in the shop.

As I was sighing about the sad state that my wallet had fallen into, she casually suggested a way to earn money, “Um, do you want to go to the Cave of Trials? I’d like to level up a bit more too,” trying to cheer me up.

There was not a shadow of her former troublemaker self from when I first met her. Though I couldn’t quite say that she was now a reliable partner, I did start to think that it was quite helpful to have Train Girl around.

It might be that by no longer being a loner, she had matured mentally, causing her hidden skill of caring for people to blossom.

The rise of Train Girl’s stock could not be stopped.

She might actually be Miss Heroine after all.

After we finished shopping, we went for two sets of Training at the Cave of Trials, once more raising Train Girl’s level and funds.

The level ups were not as absurd as last time, but still Train Girl had swiftly climbed to level 72, and we also earned around 60000E. Once again, I received half of the spoils, and in addition I also claimed the Wakizashi that the Armor Knights had dropped once more.

Even if the only reason we could earn this through Training was because I was here, I did still feel bad for getting all of this while doing nothing, but I was just met with a smile and “Don’t worry

about it, if it weren't for you I never would've thought of earning money like this, Souma."

Miss Heroine was seriously a heroine.

By the time we sold the drops, it was starting to get late. It seemed that Train Girl was returning to her own home again, so we would disband here for now.

"Well then, I guess this is it for today."

"Okay. But I feel like I'm forgetting something."

"Forgetting something?"

But it didn't seem like that she forgot to buy something, and we didn't really bring anything to the Cave of Trials.

"Ah, it's probably just my imagination. See you tomorrow!"

"Ahh, later."

We very naturally made a promise to meet again. This was also something that would've been unthinkable only a day ago.

While turning many times to wave at me, Train Girl gradually grew smaller.

Waving back at her, I thought,

(But, things can't continue like this forever…)

about the end of this relationship.

It was difficult to clear Nekomimineko without dying, but to do so while making sure that nobody else dies would be even harder. No matter how many times I considered it, Train Girl

was unfortunately too weak for the adventures that laid ahead. There was no way I could take her past the capital.

(But I feel like I'm only involving myself deeper.)

I felt that the intensity with which Train Girl was looking at me was accelerating. This meant that my weight within Train Girl was becoming larger.

At the same time, the existence of Train Girl within me was growing day by day.

Soon, when *that time* comes, will I be able to leave Train Girl behind? Will Train Girl be able to resist chasing after me?

It might have been careless of me to have become so involved with Train Girl.

(I should cool my head and reflect for a bit.)

Thinking this, I went to a certain place.

That place was, of course…

–

BooBooBooB

–the church.

When you think of reflecting, of course repenting comes to mind, and when you think of repenting it has to be the Marimite Dojo.

Through repenting at the church, I raised my mastery of Step as well as the level of my movement skills, learning Jump, Highstep, and Highjump.

Overcome by my high tension,

“Repenting is the bestttttt!!”

catching Marielle’s reproachful gaze out of the corner of my eye, I did a fist pump.

And so, the night passed, and ‘twas the fifth day of my life inside a game.

“Good morning!”

Seeing Miss Heroine’s smile first thing in the morning really lifted my spirits.

While I was repenting in the Marimite Dojo, my worries and troubles had melted away together with my stress.

Though I wouldn’t change my mind about saying goodbye to her when leaving Ramlich, until that time arrives, I plan to fully appreciate the fortune of having met her. That was the decision that I had come to.

To be honest, Train Girl was not a bad choice as a party member for the time being. She was sometimes slightly irritating, but if you get used to that, she was lively, brave, generally positive, and didn't have any major…

"Huh? Is that…"

Just as I was thinking such thoughts, I came to learn one thing.

The girl named Ina Traille was definitely Train Girl through and through.

"–You. Are you Souma?"

The new calamity that she had brought (Train-ed) came in the form of a beautiful black-haired female.

Extra.

NekomiminekoWiki ››› Section from "Relevant Videos"

[Mitsuki Hisame (Character)]

Our supreme Miss Cat Ears. Fast and strong.
At the end of a dead heat with Princess Shelmia, she splendidly took the throne as number one most popular character.
Top character in both strength and popularity! Compared to the frequent movement of her cat ears, she scarcely shows emotion, leading to the theory that the cat ears are actually her main body.

What you have been waiting for is below ↓

Watching Hisame's Cat Ears http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Watching Hisame's Cat Ears 2 http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Hisame's Cat Ears Summary Video 1

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Hisame's Cat Ears Summary Video 2

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Hisame's Cat Ears Summary Video 3

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Hisame's Cat Ears Summary Video 4

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Hisame's Cat Ears Summary Video 5x

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Hisame's Cat Ears Summary Video 6

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Intently Admiring Hisame's Cat Ears

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Getting Killed After Touching Hisame's Cat Ears

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Getting Killed After Touching Hisame's Cat Ears 2

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

I Also Got Killed After Touching Hisame's Cat Ears

http://xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

※Clicking on a link will bring you to the video site.

Chapter 6 – The Embodiment of Nekomimineko.

Part 1.

I was able to recognize her the moment I saw her.

There was no way that I would mistake her for anyone else.

“Mitsuki Hisame…”

The name of the girl also called the Helping Cheeter slipped from my mouth.

Also known as Nekomimineko’s strongest female adventurer, and the character that could also be called the mercy of Nekomimineko.

Also known as an embodiment of Nekomimineko’s ideals, and the existence most loved by the Nekomimineko staff.

Her sleek black hair flowed down until her waist, and, as if in contrast, her skin was pure white. Her thin body wrapped in a white costume seemed as though it could snap at any moment, giving her presence an impression of ephemerality.

But, the moment you look at her expressionless face giving off an air of “don’t touch me and I won’t slice you”, you would instantly come to understand that she was not such a fragile existence.

On her perfectly shaped face to which even calling it beautiful would come off as cliched, her almond-shaped eyes encompassed a strength of will such that a single glance could cause one to shudder in fear, yet also a sense of mysteriousness that seemed to suck one in.

However, even her frighteningly perfect beauty was no more than a simple accessory adorning her identity.

More than anything, her most distinct characteristic lay directly above her artistically sculpted face.

–Proudly enshrined above her head, NECOMIMI!!

It was likely that the Nekomimineko staff had worked their socks off modelling cat ears in this game.

Born from those efforts were those extremely realistic yet adorable cat ears that twitch as if they had a life of their own.

Sometimes, rarely, they would also flap.

When surprised, they would fold flat.

If there was a sudden noise from somewhere, one of them would rotate towards it, and when it was trying very hard it ended up in a twist.

Most probably, the characters with cat ears had a specialized AI that controlled the motion of the cat ears. How naturally and

precisely they moved could not have been the result of just following a character's movements.

Joy, sadness, anger, fear, and surprise could all be expressed through the cat ears in this game, and in fact, a specialized AI chose appropriate expressions based on the situation.

Even if they had slacked off everywhere else, at least when it came to cat ears, the work of the producers was perfect, without a single fault to be found.

…Actually, you could say that it was more than perfect.

They were more adorable than any pair of cat ears in reality, yet did not lose their sense of realism.

And within them, combined with her character design and popularity, the cat ears of Mitsuki Hisame had been called the greatest or even the ultimate cat ears.

Quoting, "I can stare at them for a whole day and not get tired of them" "Just by seeing them I feel glad to be alive" "Whoa, these are some nice NEKOMIMI… sorry, NECOMIMI!" "In this field at least Nekomimineko must be at least 20 years ahead" "Calling these cute or adorable, none of you understand the true quality of these cat ears! The level of tech behind these is just unbelievable you know!? Look carefully! Look at its resolution and the design that makes full use of it, and think about just what kind of logic would be needed to make it move so naturally. You should study it carefully. See, you can tell just by looking! Technologically, the logic is, soft, and fluffy… so cuuute~ soo

adorableee~~" "Marry me, Mitsuki!" "Actually, I want to marry these cat ears instead." "They might be the scum known as the Nekomimineko staff, but I have to salute them for making these cat ears at least" "They said that it took them half a year to develop these cat ears, but I've been admiring them for an entire year" "With the tsun from her pride and aloofness, and the soft mofumofu sensation from touching her ears, this must be what tsunmofu is!" "I unconsciously tried to touch it and was killed ten times over by the Cheeter, but thinking back it was a good memory" "I just want to caress them all day."

I personally didn't have any extreme interest or fetish in cat ears, but Hisame's cat ears did have something that made me want to try touching them even if I did get sliced to death.

Some kind of strange magic that seemed to suck you in before you realise…

"S-Souma?"

Without realizing, I must have been gawking at her cat ears, but Train Girl called me back to my senses.

I took a good look, and, in front of me, Hisame's expression had not changed one bit, as she continued to stare at me. However, the cat ears on her head were slightly bent, showing displeasure… so cuuute~ soo adorableee~~. …Now's not the time for that! Just how did she happen to appear here?

"You, are you Souma?"

"Um, yeah. I'm Souma…"

As I confirmed, I started wondering how she knew my name.

The reason Hisame had been called the mercy of Nekomimineko was because anywhere other than inside the Demon Lord's castle, she would randomly appear and help out the player.

Within events and quests such as the Royal Capital Invasion which were unavoidable once certain conditions were met, there were some that required a certain level of firepower to clear. There were many cases where one would save right before one of those events, only to find out that they were too weak and couldn't clear the event, and finding themselves stuck.

However, even in those cases there was still a ray of hope.

The appearance of Hisame was random and did not have that high of a probability, but when she does appear she helps the player for nothing in return.

Her strength was honestly probably stronger than that of a player who had cleared the game, so when she is helping, the case of being unable to clear the event because the enemies are too strong would never happen.

What's more, whether because of a bug or some other reason, she would still naturally appear even after the Demon Lord's Blessing. Well, based on that one might think that she was a character that couldn't be married, but it had been shown that she could join your party and even be married.

Near the end of the Nekomimineko popularity poll she was tied for first with Princess Shelmia, but then it was confirmed that

the princess was a character that couldn't be married, so Hisame ended up shooting ahead.

I've gone quite off topic, but that was the helpful character she is, and even when meeting the player for the first time she would offer to help with, "Do you require my help?"

There shouldn't have been any meeting events other than that, and I definitely had not heard of any developments in the form of waiting in front of the inn and asking the player's name.

Facing my cautious self, Hisame calmly opened her mouth.

"I… accept various requests from people, to pass my daily boredom."

"Eh? O-Okay…"

I knew that. Or rather, she really was helping the player just because she was bored huh.

"I found a request, if you can call it that, in this town."

"A request?"

I couldn't tell where this was going at all.

"Yes. It said that in this town, there was a horrible pervert who deceives females with fake identities, threatens them with various devious movements, lures them into dark caves with verbal trickery, and violate their bodies with the lure of escape, and that they wanted this person to be brought to justice."

"That's… quite horrible."

I could somewhat start to see where this conversation was going now. Strangely, each phrase seemed to sound familiar for some reason.

But the biggest hint was from Train Girl beside me, who had turned pale and started shaking when she heard those words.

“Um, just wondering, but, where did you see that request?”

“It was posted on the bulletin board in the town plaza.”

The moment Hisame said this, Train Girl froze.

(It . was . that . time . huhhhhhhhh!!)

Back when we visited the Skyboat platform.

When I told Train Girl to go ahead to the shops, I think she said something like this.

《Roger! Ah, but you better come soon! If you don’t, I’ll slander you all over the bulletin board in the plaza!》

At that time, Train Girl had probably half jokingly posted this on the board. Then, she completely forgot about it. She probably never imagined that someone like Hisame would end up seeing that…

(Summoning someone like the Helping Cheeter as an enemy is seriously out of my expectations!)

Just as I had started to see her in a new light, she does something amazing.

You really can’t underestimate Train Girl.

“N-No, that’s!”

Train Girl tried to explain to Hisame. But, Hisame interrupted her.

“Don’t worry. This will be over quickly.”

Declaring that, her hand moved slightly.

(…Hmm?)

Even then, I continued to look at her cat ears.

That’s why, the moment I saw her cat ears curl up, I reactively used Step.

“–Eh?”

Having jumped backwards, what I saw was Hisame, who had appeared in front of me in an instant, and a glint of silver that had passed through where I was standing a moment earlier, as well as,

“Oh? So you were able to dodge that.”

twitching, her cat ears.

Part 2.

(Ahh, that was close…)

The sword that she had drawn without warning had accurately traced out a path to take my life.

I felt cold sweat as the animation for Step ended and I landed back on the ground. I've fought her many times in the game. Defeating her in a one-on-one duel was one of the requirements for recruiting Hisame.

Hisame's attacks come with no preparatory movements, and her expression does not change at all.

I had been killed many times by her unexpected attacks, but through that I had learned a trick for detecting her attacks. That was, of course, to look at the cat ears.

Though Hisame herself shows nothing, there was one thing, her cat ears, that tense up slightly when she was about to attack. So, by seeing the moment those cat ears stiffen, I could see through the timing of her attacks.

There is a saying in Nekomimineko that goes "cat ears convey more than words can say", but I never thought that cat ears would actually save my life one day.

At that moment, surprised by Hisame's sudden actions, Train Girl threw herself between Hisame and me.

"W-Wait! I was the one who wrote all those things about Souma on that board! I was just…"

"Train Girl! Don't bother!"

At this point, it was useless. This much I can tell.

Hisame's cat ears were twitching with excitement. Those were movements of when she's enjoying the battle. Most likely, she was in a state of fight first, talk after.

"She won't listen to you now!"

"But…"

"Don't worry about it, just get behind me."

Saying something reminiscent of what I said when we first met, I guided Train Girl behind me while drawing Shiranui. Perhaps she sensed something from my words, as Train Girl had a worried expression as she complied.

(Still, what do I do?)

Even if I could see through the timing of her attacks, coming up with a way to defeat Hisame as I am now would be a far stretch. In addition, I couldn't very well kill her over a simple misunderstanding like this.

I continued to watch Hisame cautiously in order to hide the disturbance within me, but against my expectations, Hisame did not make any moves.

"Because of my surprise attack earlier, I'll let you make the next move."

What's more, she confidently threw a jab at me. But, with how I was right now, I was thankful for this.

I held Shiranui in my right hand, and, taking the Wakizashi out from my bag, I readied it in my left hand.

Last night, pleased at having obtained a new weapon, I had raised my ninja sword and dagger skills slightly with Master Torch. I didn't expect that they would become useful so soon, but I guess it pays to be ready for anything.

Confirming that Train Girl had retreated behind me, I considered my options. At the moment, it seemed that only I was Hisame's target. Getting hurt over something like this would be stupid. I should let Train Girl run away, and then find somewhere to somehow escape myself.

In a small voice, I whispered to Train Girl.

"Train Girl. When I give the signal, run back inside the inn."

"B-But…!"

"Listen to me! With two people, I can't escape even if I want to."

"…Okay. Make sure that you definitely, definitely don't get killed."

That, I couldn't promise…

I once again looked at the girl with cat ears. I had fought her in one-on-one duels many times before, but I had never thought that I would face her as actual enemies even once.

In the game, she only ever helped out the player. But, when the game became reality, it was only natural that she would offer to help other people. Even then, I wished that she wouldn't take something like a bad prank as a serious request, and especially not one off that bulletin board…

Gathering my determination, I stepped forward.

Luckily, perhaps because they had sensed a fight, the presence of people in the surroundings had disappeared. As it was quite spacious all around, it was a situation in which I could go all out with using skills.

(A signal, huh.)

This was not a formal duel, and so there weren't any signals or shouts to begin the fight.

So, I just readied Shiranui, and activated a skill. The skill was, of course,

"Invisible Blade!"

the greatsword skill, Sideswipe.

This skill hits areas where the blade does not even reach, so to the opponents it seems like they are being attacked by an invisible blade. It shouldn't have been avoidable, but,

"Hmm?"

the moment I activated the skill, Hisame slid backwards.

In an instant she left the range of the skill, and the Sideswipe sliced through thin air.

"Quite a mysterious skill you're using."

Easily seeing through what couldn't be seen, Hisame maintained a composed attitude, but that was fine.

"Mm?"

I cancelled the end of the Sideswipe into a forward Step.

As Hisame's cat ears were showing surprise over the skill cancelling, I further cancelled the Step into another skill.

"Lingering, Shadow!"

The range of the slash that I unleashed together with my shout was larger than that of Sideswipe… or so it seemed. Hisame seemed to be slightly confused, but she jumped back even further.

And there it was, the golden chance.

"Train Girl, run!"

As I urged her to escape with a sharp voice, I also started to flee.

The moment the skill was about to finish, I cancelled into a sideways Step, trying to escape into an alleyway, but at that time Hisame had already started to chase.

(Too quick! And, too quick!)

At that instant, her catchphrase "the only character who moves slower when using Step" popped into my head.

All that meant was that, as a fact, her normal movement speed was faster than that of Step.

(She'll catch up to the rapid cancel dash!)

I instantly made my decision, short-cancelling Step into Highstep, plunging into the alley.

Highstep was a powered up version of Step, and allowed you to move with a speed higher than that of Step. It was possible to cancel Step into Highstep, but from there it was not possible to connect it directly back to a low rank attack skill like Slash.

Even then, I entered the alley with great speed,

(Jump, Quick Stab!)

Cancelling into the flexible Jump skill instead of Slash, I immediately cancelled that for the dagger skill Quick Stab, shooting out of the alley at top speed.

“Kyaa!”

“Uwah!”

A few bystanders were surprised seeing me dart out with weapon in hand, but I had no time to pay them any mind.

Threading between groups of people,

(Ugh, Step!)

I further cancelled Quick Stab into Step.

My stamina was starting to hit its limits. I wanted to take a break, but it wasn’t safe yet.

If I head in a straight direction, I’ll be caught when my stamina runs out. Zigzagging my way forward, I jumped to the side using Step. Seeing a suitable alleyway,

(Highstep!)

I wrought out the last of my strength, and cancelled Step into Highstep.

My chest throbbed with the pain of overusing my stamina. Using any more skills without a break would be harsh.

I purposely angled myself with the alleyway,

“Guh!”

colliding with the wall to forcibly terminate the skill, cancelling the after-cast stun.

The impact knocked the air out of me, but if I stopped here then this would’ve all been for nothing.

(Hide!)

I desperately concentrated, forcing my spent body to focus, and activated the lowest level dagger skill, Hide. Immediately, black light burst from around me, surrounding my body.

“…Haaa, hoo!”

Finally, I was able to take a breath.

Hide was a skill that made one slightly harder to find as long as one wasn’t seen activating the skill. It was only good for a temporary rest, but now I can…

“You’re quite interesting indeed.”

I felt something cold drip down the back of my neck.

Instantly, all the hair on my body stood on end.

(She couldn't have followed me the entire way!? Even after I used all those skills!?)

I didn't turn around. From behind me, a cold voice descended.

"Watching from behind, it seemed like you were using skills one after another. What's the trick behind that?"

"…Sorry, but I don't think I'll answer that question."

Watching from behind, so that means she had been right behind me this whole time.

This Cheeter's abilities are way too cheating.

Though there was the duel event, she was an unusual character in that generally she was not an enemy, so no matter how cheating her strength level was, players didn't complain. So it was only now that I felt just how absurd it was.

"That first invisible slash caught my attention too, but your second skill, that was a Wide Slash wasn't it. I had thought it was a useless skill, but to think it could be used like that."

The second skill. I had yelled out a cool skill name like Lingering Shadow, but it was indeed just a Wide Slash.

It was a pitiful skill that Nekomimineko players called the Illusionary Wide Slash, where although a visual effect of close to 5 meters can be seen, the actual attack range is no more than 2 meters.

But in this world that had essentially become reality, there probably aren't many people who could ignore the visual effects. Especially for someone specialized in avoidance like her, I thought that even if her instincts said otherwise, she would still very likely choose to dodge the effect as well.

"You're very different from any swordsman I've seen. You fight in a very strange way, and while you are a swordsman, you're not a swordsman. If I were to give you a label, it would probably be something like Strange Sword User."

For some reason, I received a bizarre nickname.

I was happy for the praise, but I'd rather if you could just move that sword off my neck.

(Well, this was the worst possible timing. Of all things, it had to be right after I used Hide…!)

I had no ways of defending myself. My stamina can't be said to have recovered either, and if I were attacked now there was no hope of dodging it.

I felt cold sweat roll down my face.

"Just for reference, could you tell me how you were able to dodge my first attack?"

That's why, for the purpose of buying time, I asked a question.

My first attack was Invisible Blade, or in other words, a Sideswipe. I was actually legitimately curious how she was able to dodge that.

“It was because I saw the air wavering.”

…The words of a master is really incomprehensible to others.

But, at least she responded. If I can buy some more time, maybe I’ll be able to do something.

“If you’re trying to buy time, it’s pointless.”

However, that ray of hope was mercilessly cut by her words.

“It’s unfortunate, but this is farewell.”

Sneaking a glance over my shoulder, I saw Hisame’s sword, raised.

“Goodbye, forever.”

That sword, swung down towards me–

“Let’s have a duel!”

–but right before it reached me, I yelled out.

“A duel?”

The words that I said in desperation seem to have caught her interest.

Her sword stopped just as it was about to hit me.

While scared to death about what was going to happen, I raised my voice further without showing even a hint of that.

“Yeah, that’s right! Mitsuki Hisame! [I challenge you to a one-on-one duel]!!”

Honestly, it’s not something that I should be saying with a sword swinging at me, but I did have the belief that this would cause her sword to halt.

[I challenge you to a one-on-one duel] were the keywords for initiating her duel event. I knew that she would respond to them.

The only problem was…

“Do you fully understand the meaning of those words you just said? A duel means putting your life on the line.”

that event wasn’t a duel in some laid-back Duel System or something like that, but a genuine death match.

The duel event was originally an event to recruit Hisame as an official party member.

According to her in the game, she couldn’t possibly leave her back to someone who wasn’t strong enough to make her yield in a serious showdown. Her personality was really quite difficult.

That said, if you actually killed her, then she wouldn’t be able to join your party. In order to clear this event, you had to fight one of the strongest NPCs without the help of anyone else, and somehow reduce her HP to below 10%.

All while she was trying to kill you with her full power.

By the way, if the player gets killed by Hisame in this event, then if Hisame's affinity points were high enough, she would murmur,

"I didn't mean to lose you in this way."

in a famous scene where a teardrop rolls down the face of the emotionless Hisame, but now that this wasn't a game anymore, triggering that event wouldn't be a joke.

Having her suddenly turn affectionate after being killed was worthless. If that's really how you feel then stop trying to kill me.

In any case, that was how strong her feelings towards a serious duel were.

If she'd even cut down someone she liked, then she would have no hesitation doing so to someone she only just met.

However, in this situation I was just going to get killed anyways. So, my only choice was to seek out a path through this event.

"Of course! I'm prepared to lay down my life to fight you!"

But really, I'm not prepared at all! I don't want to die!

"Is that so. …Then, I have nothing more to say. Let us settle this with a duel."

Nonetheless, those words had an effect, as, saying that, she readily withdrew her sword.

But, wait a moment. If I were to fight her in my current situation, do I have any chance of winning?

Right now, between me and her was an insurmountable difference in abilities. From the start of the game, she was at a high level, and her statuses were mostly at cheating levels. On top of that, she was wearing high level unique equipment. The secret to her strength was not just her ridiculous statuses, but also attributed to the power of her equipment.

Their lineup was,

<Getsuei [Sword] Weight: 2 Ama no Hagoromo [Robe] Weight: 0 Skanda's Tabi [Shoes] Weight: 1>

<Bracelet of Four Elements Weight:0 Seeker's Ring Weight: 0>

with a combined weight of only 3, totaling less than a single Wakizashi. Way too unfair.

Even then, their quality was guaranteed. While it looks like she was wearing but a thin layer, its defense was extraordinary. Shiranui boasts exceptional attack power since it was also categorized as a greatsword, but in the end it was just a mid-game weapon. Even if I hit her, it probably wouldn't cause much damage.

Her clothes look so delicate that it seems like they would instantly burn if set on fire, but that is a huge misconception. It turns out that both her robe and bracelet come with elemental resistances, completely protecting against the four main

elements of fire, water, wind, and earth. Their magic defense was also high.

Trying to damage Hisame with magic was likely even more hopeless than trying to do so with physical attacks.

In addition, she also had high resistance to abnormal status effects. Whether the resistances are from her robe or from herself, I have never seen her ever get inflicted with an abnormal status.

At the very least, it would be impossible for the current me to inflict any kind of status effects on her.

What's more, it's said that both her robe and shoes have the effect of increasing agility. I was only able to defeat her after clearing the game. It was only with the combination of skill cancelling and custom magic that I was able to catch up with her speed.

However, custom magic couldn't be created without going to the capital, and obviously the amount of skills I could use was much less than in my game data.

At the minimum, in order for me to win, I would need to be able to keep up with Hisame, the fastest NPC's, speed, and hit her with an attack that would effectively pierce through her end-game level defense…

Huh? Isn't this impossible?

“Shall we go back to the place earlier? This place isn’t very suitable for fighting.”

Not noticing my panic, Hisame seemed fired up.

Her cat ears were twitching with happiness. Even with such cute ears, she was a complete battle junkie. At this rate the duel… no, my slaughter will start with no questions asked.

“Wait just a moment! I said a duel, but I didn’t say that it would be with swords.”

“…What do you mean?”

I reflexively called for her to wait, and Hisame inquired in a low voice. Her cat ears stood up in displeasure.

“You did say that you are prepared to lay down your life for this duel. Are you intending to go back on your word?”

With this much bloodlust emanating from her, I could tell without even looking at her cat ears.

She exceedingly despised those who break their promises. This was bad.

“Of course, I am still pledging my life on the outcome of this duel. If I lose then I will give this life to you. However, I have no reason to kill you. That’s why, a swordfight is out of the question.”

Somehow, it seemed like I was saying I could beat Hisame. Or rather, won’t you let me keep my life even if I lose?

I don’t want to lose my life.

“I see. But then, how do you plan on holding this duel?”

Suggest something stupid and your life is forfeit, her eyes said.

If I said something like rock-paper-scissors, then I would probably be cut down on the spot. What could I suggest that would satisfy her, and yet allow me to win? I put my whole mind towards finding such an idea.

(…Wait, that’s not quite right.)

I should be more precise here. I don’t really care about winning. I just need a way to break out of this situation.

Think! What is most optimal for me, think!!

“Well?”

Hisame looked at me with the familiar blank expression that I had seen many times in game.

…That’s right, familiar.

I knew her very well in the game. Not just her power. I knew her personality and what she liked, and even her strengths and weaknesses. I just need to recall those things.

…Mitsuki Hisame was a character with contrastive personalities.

While explosively violent at times, sometimes she appears deep and thoughtful. She was whimsical and capricious, but would never fail to uphold an exchanged promise. And, albeit usually

maintaining a detached attitude, she would give her all for the people that she cared about.

Her slightly stiff way of talking was due to the strict upbringing by her parents during her childhood.

She had always believed in her own speed. There was a charming episode when she was small where she seriously tried to race a horse and cried when she lost, and an episode after she grew up that would cause the smile to freeze on your face where she seriously tried to race a horse and won.

Her feelings never showed on her face, but they were written all over her cat ears. She maintained a absolute poker face, and I almost never see even a slight frown on her face, but nobody has ever seen her cat ears stay still for over ten seconds. Due to their fluid motions being completely silent, it is difficult to even sense their operation, but be assured that the entire time, those cat ears are busily flopping about.

Her special skills were Iaido and knitting stuffed animals. Her hobbies were collecting swords and stuffed animals. Sometimes, the two get mixed together, and something like a stuffed bear wielding a demonic sword had been spotted in her room.

Even when surrounded by hundreds of monsters, her bold spirit would refuse to be shaken, but she was extremely bashful, shrieking and cowering when seen in her underwear by others.

No matter how strong the enemy, Hisame would force them into submission before her, causing those who knew her to shake

with fear while standing in front of her, but she herself was afraid of heights, causing her legs to tremble when standing at a high place. Her cat ears tremble as well.

When a person is killed right in front of her eyes, she would not lose her cool, and sometimes she would even disregard her own survival in order to achieve her goals, but when a favored stuffed animal's arm was torn she had spent three days and three nights weeping.

She was extremely skilled at using a sword, but extremely poor at using a kitchen knife. On the battlefield she could prepare and cook the enemies as she pleased, and at home she was toyed with by the ingredients.

As a serious battle junkie, she lived for fighting, but when alone at home she had said something like what an idol might say, "Ahh, I wish I could become a normal girl."

This, was the Mitsuki Hisame that I knew!!

This is bad, she was flawless! In the sense of being a moe character!

"Have you decided?"

Running out of patience, Hisame once more called out to me, while I was quivering with excitement.

I guess I have no choice. This might be a bit simple, but…

"Yeah, the duel will be with, coo… n-no, nevermind!!"

Ah, that was close. Just as I was about to say cooking, Hisame's bloodlust swelled a hundred times over. If I had continued, I probably would've died just like that.

There's way too many paths to a bad end!

"If you are trying to make fun of me…"

"Wait! I was just kidding! I've actually already decided a long time ago."

Snapping the dead end flag that was about to be raised just from staying silent for a bit, I strongly insisted.

But, this was by no means a bluff.

The optimal solution for me: without killing her and without dying, changing this pinch into a chance potentially leading to the best possible result I could hope for, I had come up with such a method.

That's why, I earnestly announced.

"Let's play tag."

Part 3.

As if not understanding what I was saying, she asked with a puzzled voice.

"Tag, you said? Am I right to understand it as a match where I try to stick my sword into specific parts of your body?"

"You're completely wrong!"

It was not even close. What's with that ultra violent game of tag!

Not to mention that it was essentially no different from a sword fight, and somehow my death had already become a given.

“See, you’re confident about your speed, right? But I’m also pretty confident in my ability to run away. So, why don’t we make that into a duel?”

However, she shook her head, showing that she just wasn’t convinced.

“I seemed to have caught you quite easily just now.”

“That’s because the conditions weren’t right. If I could freely escape at full speed, then even you would never be able to catch me.”

It seems that even she took some offense at those arrogant remarks.

Her cat ears stood up in anger, as if growling. …so cuuute~ soo adorableee~~.

Well, it definitely was cute but now’s not the time for that. Either way, I had no intention of backing down here. I might’ve found a way of escaping from what can’t be escaped from. I wanted to try betting on that.

“…I understand.”

The one to give in was Hisame. While still emotionless, a hint of amazement surfaced, as she opened her mouth.

“If you insist so, then I have no problems with that as the duel. However, what shall the time limit be? To be blunt, I am

confident that I can catch you within ten seconds, so how long…”

“Thirty minutes.”

Interrupting Hisame, I spoke.

“…Are you serious?”

“I am very serious.”

My gaze met with her cold eyes. For a short while, we stared at each other silently.

“You don’t appear to be lying.”

It seems like her eyes also act as a lie detector. You have way too many useful features, Miss Cheeter.

“Then, what about the use of weapons? Are they entirely banned?”

I shook my head to those words.

“Nope, there will be nothing against the use of weapons. None of your attacks will even scratch me anyways.”

“Those are some awfully big words you’re spouting.”

But, even as I was saying that, I was filled with cold sweat inside. This was actually quite a hard choice.

In the case that things don’t go exactly as I imagined, I would have no chance in hell of avoiding her even if she did not use any weapons. In that case, bringing it back to a fight would be better.

…Just relatively better, though.

“In return for that, well not really, but please give me an entire day to make preparations.”

“You want some time?”

This was the important part. If we were to start the duel right away, there’s no way I would be able to win. Even if I had to be a bit forceful, I need to make sure this conversation goes the right way.

“Yeah. Let’s see…”

Now, how should I set the time. Looking at my watch as a basis for the decision, the time had just ticked past 8:30.

This would probably work.

“Then, let’s start the duel around 24 hours from now, tomorrow morning at 9.”

If I remembered, this town had a bell that rang during hours that were multiples of 3. It was nice and simple.

“Tomorrow morning at 9, no, five minutes before that, come to the inn. The 30 minutes starting from 9’o clock sharp will be the duration of our duel. In those 30 minutes, you win if you touch me. Otherwise, I win. How about it?”

“…It sounds fine.”

Luckily, Hisame did not raise any objections, agreeing to the date and time of the duel.

But, what followed was the real fight. I'll follow this momentum to the end.

"That's all of my requirements regarding the duel itself. But, before that, I have a few conditions."

"Conditions?"

I nodded.

"First, no matter what the results of this duel are, I want you to promise that you won't do anything to the girl I was with earlier, Ina Traille."

"I had no such intentions to begin with."

"Even then, can you promise me that."

Stressing my words, I managed an indifferent nod.

"Then, I promise that I will not do anything to her. Of course, if she were to attack me then that would be a different matter."

"That's fine."

Hisame was whimsical, but she kept her promises. Now, I probably don't need to worry about Train Girl too much.

Even in the very worst case, it ends with just my death. I felt a weight being lifted.

"Then, I have one more condition. Until the start of the duel, I want you to stay away from me. I do believe that you're not the type of person to pull dirty tricks, but I won't be able to calm

down if I'm worried about sneak attacks before the duel starts or not being able to properly make my preparations."

Well, I know for sure that she probably won't do anything like that, but this was still important.

I distanced myself from Hisame.

"Our current distance… seems to be around three meters. I want to be sure that you won't come any closer than this until the duel starts."

This was a completely selfish demand, so I did not know if Hisame would agree to it…

"You don't need to worry about that. But since you say so, I will promise that too."

Yes! She took it!

Cheering in my heart, I confirmed it again.

"…You sure? Since you promised, from this moment until the duel starts, if you approach any closer than three meters from me then you'd lose the duel by default. Is that okay?"

"I said that's fine."

I got a verbal confirmation. This should simplify things a lot for the future.

But, just as I was about to relax, this time Hisame started with her requests.

“In return, there are two things that I would like to confirm as well.”

“…What are they?”

Did she see through my plan? Nervously I answered, but what she was asking about were completely different.

“You still haven’t made clear something very important. If you win, what do you demand from me?”

“Ah…”

Thinking only about how to overcome this situation, I completely overlooked this.

“Uhm, uhh, let’s see…”

Hisame’s duel event was an event to have Hisame join your party. That’s why, if I were to say so, she would most likely join my party.

But to be honest, if that happened now, the event chain that would be triggered would be suicide.

I would definitely die along the way.

That’s why maybe I should choose something random instead…

What do people usually demand at times like this? Money? Or maybe equipment?

“Since you are risking your life in this duel, I am prepared for it to be of considerable value. Though I may not amount to much, I am willing to offer anything within my power.”

“Anything!?”

The words ‘anything’ were bewitching words that must not be used to tempt the desires of a young man.

If she says anything, then would even petting Hisame’s cat ears for an entire day be okay?

Actually, how do you even pet or caress cat ears in the first place? I haven’t the least idea, but I really want to try it!

However, I suppressed my own desires, and shook my head.

“No, I don’t need anything. At the moment, there’s nothing that I want to receive or request from you. But if I have to say something… Then how about, if I win, you make this the very last life-or-death duel that you will have?”

“You don’t want my strength?”

Perhaps not asking for anything had hurt her pride as she said something like that, but well it was true. Though it’s only because the resulting events would be too dangerous.

I picked my words carefully.

“Well, it would be reassuring if you were to lend your strength. But when there’s not really any pressing danger, I prefer to pass the time lazily by myself.”

“Is that so. …You are a strange person.”

Her tone was cold as always, and her manner of speaking was blunt, but her outstretched cat ears stooped slightly forwards with the exchange.

“That’s why, this is fine. So, what’s the other thing?”

But, the instant I asked that, I could tell that the atmosphere around her changed.

As if her behavior just now had been an illusion, with frightening gravity, she said.

“–Once more, can you swear to hand over your life if you lose this duel?”

Was this weight behind what it means to have a life-or-death duel?

At that moment, I felt as if a heavy something was pressing down on my body. Resisting that force, I slowly, but clearly, declared.

“…Yeah. I will wager my life on this duel.”

As I finished saying that, the pressure from Hisame receded.

“Okay. That’s all I wanted.”

Unclenching the fist that I had unconsciously formed, I confirmed with Hisame one last time.

“Then, with these conditions the duel is established. You won’t complain about any of the rules afterwards, right?”

“That is something you need not worry about. I won’t breach the agreements of a duel even if the world were to turn upside down.”

Saying that, she unhesitatingly turned around on the spot. With this, the rules of the duel are established, and the negotiations are over.

This would’ve been a good point for me to end the conversation.

“Wait a moment!”

However, for some reason, I called out to Hisame.

“What is it?”

The face that she turned around showed no emotions whatsoever.

Her cat ears didn’t show anything but a bit of interest in me either. She was calm from the bottom of her heart.

…Even though she had just agreed to a fight with someone’s life on the line.

“Hey, why are you so obsessed with life-or-death duels?”

This was a question that I had since in the game, and one that I had never been able to get a clear answer to. It was probably too much to ask for reasons from Nekomimineko’s game characters.

But, if it’s she who was now real in this world, then maybe…

“I know that I have a different sense of values compared with other people, but I believe that there are important things to be found past the line of death.”

To my question filled with anticipation, she all too easily gave an answer.

“I, see…”

I had thought that she was a huge battle maniac, but from her reply I learned that she had her own faiths and beliefs. Though I couldn’t empathize with them, I could understand them.

“Is that why you tried to slice me and kill me the moment we met?”

I had thought that her actions were way too rash.

It could be that the amount or existence of my sins could be judged depending on whether I cross the line of death or not. It would be an extremely messed up line of reasoning, but if that was the case then at the very least I could understand the logic.

I asked, thinking it was something like that, but she responded as if dumbfounded by my question.

“What are you talking about? Why would I actually kill someone over an accusation like that? You seemed like you would be fun to tease, so I wanted to show off my strength and intimidate you a bit.”

“Is that so. I se… huh?”

Eh? Wha? Wait? Wait wait wait?

She brazenly said it. She just brazenly said it, but could she have just said something incredible right now?

It couldn't be, but, just maybe.

If I didn't avoid Hisame's attack at the very start…

Or even if I just didn't challenge her to a duel…

Would Hisame have stopped her attack just short, say something like, "I was just testing you," and end the battle right there?

But I just had to go and bring up something like a duel, provoking Hisame who wasn't planning to kill me to begin with into this battle with my life on the line?

Could I have gone and done something really unnecessary, or rather, brought all of this down upon myself!?

"Then, excuse me…"

She must've gotten tired of me after seeing me hang my head and suddenly fall silent. Once again, she turned away from me and started to walk away.

Her words had indeed been a shock, but now I understood that though Hisame seemed like an indiscriminate battle maniac, she did at least know to draw the line somewhere.

(That's why I didn't actually want to do something so low like this…)

There were things that one couldn't give up so easily.

To me, my own life was of course one of those things. And, if there is something that must be done in order to protect that, I will not hesitate to do so.

That's why…

(Highstep!)

I aimed towards Hisame's back, and used a skill.

With the fastest method of movement available to me right now, I drew towards Hisame's wide open back.

(At this rate… will it work?)

She agreed to the condition that "if she approaches within three meters of me before the duel starts, she loses." To put it another way, if I can approach to within three meters of her right now, then I can claim my victory without waiting until 9 o'clock tomorrow.

It was almost a con, but I already decided that I was willing to do anything.

I aimed for the moment when Hisame completely lost her interest in me and turned her back to me. Unless she has eyes on the back of her head, she shouldn't be able to sense me approaching.

But, just as I thought Hisame's figure had turned blurry,

“So that’s how it is. Though I’m not sure whether to still call this tag.”

for some reason I heard her voice coming from behind me.

But, wa, ehhh!? Isn’t this past the level of just being too fast!?

“This was the meaning behind that strange condition. Until the start of the duel tomorrow morning at 9, you will be the one to try to catch me.”

What’s more, she had completely read me.

“H-Heh… You’re not mad that I tried to deceive you?”

Putting on the best front I could, I replied, but,

“A serious duel is where both sides fight with all their abilities. Even something like a sneak attack, if it is within the limits of the rules, it is a strategic tactic.”

Hisame was not the least unnerved. I thought she would be angrier, but I was glad to be wrong.

“…Though, if you thought that you would be able to catch me with a childish trick like this, then that is indeed an insult.”

“A-hahaha…”

Even without looking at her cat ears, I could sense the anger in her tone.

The only thing I could do was to laugh it off.

“Also, there is something that I am hiding from you as well. You will eventually come to know just how hopeless a situation the choice you made has put you in.”

Leaving behind those words, Hisame left, wearing a faintly glowing ring on her finger.

Part 4.

As Hisame left and I sunk to the ground after being freed from an enormous pressure,

“Souma!”

Train Girl showed herself, close to tears. Actually, stumbling towards me, her eyes were already swelling with tears.

She must’ve been worried seeing me in such a pathetic state.

I forced out a smile.

“Train Girl, I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Ah, y-yeah. S-Sorry, because of me…”

Train Girl hung her head, but well, half of it was my own fault.

She wasn’t completely guiltless, but nobody could’ve expected that it would end up like this.

“Don’t worry about that. There’s something that I need to tell you.”

“What is, it?”

Though I did think it was cruel to say this while she was still down-hearted, I still said it clearly.

“I promised to train you until you would be fine on your own. But, let’s end that here.”

“…Eh?”

Hearing my words, she looked up at me, stunned.

I first told Train Girl the details about Hisame, then about how Train Girl had already become more than strong enough, and how I didn’t have time now to help train her. Probably still feeling guilty that she had ended up summoning Hisame, Train Girl tearfully accepted my words.

It hurt my heart seeing her desperately holding back her tears, but even then she bravely suggested.

“B-But, would you mind if I helped you? I’ll do everything I can to find out where she is! And then if I can report that to you…”

“That’s probably useless.”

Though it would be a huge plus if she were to succeed, the reason that I rejected her idea was mostly as a restraint. It’s not like I could seriously count on it to work.

There was a reason that Hisame so readily accepted my proposition of tag. Or rather, it was because I knew this that I had proposed tag.

“The ring she was wearing. If she uses that then she can probably see through all of my movements.”

“The ring?”

“Yeah. One of her unique equipments, the Seeker’s Ring.”

–Seeker’s Ring.

It was a ring that reported the current location of a player.

This fact was only established after some time, but while the appearance of The Helping Cheeter Hisame was random, actually this random chance increased as her affinity points went up. Personality wise, she was the type that would try to help people she was close to, so I simply accepted that the system was probably made to reflect something like that, but there was a proper reason, or rather setting, behind that.

Thinking about it, Hisame would sometimes appear even in the depths of a dungeon. I had always thought this was quite inexplicable, but after she joined as a party member, I found out about the existence of that ring.

Hisame would whimsically help out people that she met, but it seemed that sometimes she would also seek out the location of people she had taken a liking to with the Seeker’s Ring and intrude on them.

At that time, the words “you can’t run from the Cheeter!!” flashed through my mind.

I didn’t know how it worked in this world, but at least from her tone it seemed that it was able to tell her my location.

What's more, if she wanted to hide from me, there was actually a much simpler way to do so. The teleportation stone, which could be used to move from one town to another instantaneously.

As a fighter class, she probably wouldn't be able to create magic portals, but as a top class adventurer she would definitely have a few teleportation stones, or be able to buy them. If she were to teleport to another town until the start of the duel, then I wouldn't be able to do anything.

I could try to ambush her as she comes back, but unfortunately when a town has multiple monoliths it was possible to choose the destination. Ramlich has a monolith both in the north end and in the south end, so if she were to use the Seeker's Ring, then no matter which one I waited at she would be able to teleport to the other.

Hearing that, Train Girl seemed to have forgotten completely about herself, turning pale and flustered.

"Th-Then, what are you going to do? You can't be thinking of just quietly letting yourself be killed…"

"Of course not. I'll just run away fair and square."

There was a ton I still had to do, and I needed to get them done before tomorrow morning. Somehow coaxing Train Girl by assuring her that I would be fine, we headed towards our first destination together.

What we did was the same as usual, Training at the Cave of Trials. Without me around, she would not be able to earn money

this way anymore. I offered to give her all of the drops since this was the last time, but she stubbornly refused.

After that, I told Train Girl that I needed to prepare some things by myself and asked her to come to the inn tomorrow morning at 8, one hour before the duel, with the money from selling the drops, and bid farewell to her.

“Sorry, Train Girl.”

To her turned back, I quietly whispered.

…I think I’m being quite unfair to her. I don’t know what the results of the duel will be. Maybe I would end up getting killed by Hisame, and this would be the last farewell between us.

I really should have told her that in person, but I wasn’t able to face her and say it.

That’s why in return, I decided to leave behind a letter.

Returning to my room and borrowing a pen and stationery, I started drafting a letter to Train Girl.

First, I wrote down the condition to read this letter if she did not hear from me by noon tomorrow, then I continued with the letter body.

Dear Train Girl,

If you are reading this letter, then I am probably no longer by your side.

But, please don't be sad.

You have already obtained the strength needed to live on by yourself.

If you just draw out a little courage, even if you can't find a companion, you should be able to at least make a few friends.

You can hate me for being selfish all you want.

But, I would like you to promise me two things.

Firstly, please don't resent Hisame.

Secondly, please don't even think about chasing after me.

The reason I trained you was not for that purpose.

You're a wonderful girl, and your

"Nonononono!"

I crumpled up the letter I was writing. For some reason, when writing a letter my tension goes way up and I end up saying things that I wouldn't normally say. It's the magic of a letter.

Struggling greatly, I somehow managed to finish an acceptable letter, and together with another object that I took from my bag, I left them with the inn owner.

I requested him to hand both of them to Train Girl when she comes tomorrow at 8.

“What? This piece of wood?”

The owner looked perplexed, but accepted it anyways. With this, there should be no more issues with Train Girl.

“Well, thanks for everything. …Though I might end up staying here again very soon.”

Saying so jokingly, I tried to head outside, when a voice called out from behind.

“You know, I still think it’s strange that you suddenly ended your stay. This letter, it’s not a will is it?”

He was surprisingly sharp. But, I glossed over it.

“Of course not, what are you talking about. And, I’ve already made arrangements for where to stay tonight.”

“…Where?”

In answer to the owner’s displeased question, I pointed towards the outskirts of town.

There were still many things that I had to do. In order to avoid any lingering regrets, I should finish as many of those that I can right now.

To start with, I paid a visit to Reinhart, something that I had been putting off for a while. Luckily, Reinhart was still in town, and he happily welcomed me.

By the way, at that time I found out that Hisame had also asked Reinhart about me.

It seemed that it was here that she found out the fact that I used interesting techniques.

“I didn’t ssay much but… sorry, wass it a problem?”

Reinhart made an apologetic face in a lizardman-like manner, and I smiled, telling him not to worry about it.

There was a chance that we might never meet again after this. I didn’t want to leave any ill will over something like that.

In the end we chatted about trivial matters, and parted with smiles.

Looking at my watch, there was still quite a bit of time until my next appointment. Taking this chance, I went to the Plateau of Sealing.

I just needed to quickly retrieve something from underground, so it didn’t take too long. Now it had become pitch black down there, but oh well.

Afterwards, I killed some time looking for bargains at the weapon store, bought something at the magic store that I wasn’t able to buy last time, and caused some mischief at the Infirmary.

Coming back outside slightly teary-eyed, I noticed that I was starting to feel hungry. As I wandered around town eating snacks along the way, the sun started to set.

Finally, the time to head towards today's final destination had come.

On the outskirts of town. There, into a structure that was by no means extravagant, yet emanating a solemn and divine feel, I entered. With large strides, I approached the girl inside who received visitors with an unfading smile,

"Oh, if it isn't Souma. You're ear…"

slowly kneeled down,

"I'm sorry, Marielle! Please let me borrow the confession room from now until tomorrow morning!!"

And pleaded.

"Marielle's such a nice person…"

Seeing me suddenly kneel seems to have troubled her slightly, but fortunately she lent me the confession room in the end.

What I desperately yelled,

"This is the last time, I'll never ask something like this from you ever again!"

might've had some effect as well.

"…Al, right. I did not think that faith lends itself to achievements, but you must be on the cusp of grasping something."

Her words made me think that she might have vaguely realized that I was trying to learn movement skills in the confession room.

She was kind, yet someone to be reckoned with.

“Ah, but now’s not the time to think about things like this.”

The time limit was tomorrow at 8. I haven’t tried pulling an all-nighter in this game world yet, but it probably wasn’t impossible.

Until then, I needed to raise the mastery of Step and Highstep, Jump and Highjump, and if possible, I wanted to learn the advanced movement skill Flash Step.

Whether I can learn this Flash Step or not would dramatically affect the development later, so I wanted to learn it no matter what.

“Ohhh, let’s do this!”

Firing myself up, I first climbed on top of the table.

Confirming that my head would be able to reach the ceiling, I activated a skill.

(JumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJumpJump…)

BooBooBooB

ooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBo
oBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBoo
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ooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBooBo
oBooBooBooBooBoo…!

…Not two minutes after I started there was a complaint.

Later,

“Thank you, very much…”

I staggered out of the church.

Ultimately having spent the entire night leveling my skills until the last minute, going by the calendar it was the sixth day since I came to this world, the day of the duel.

However, luckily I had learnt the highest ranked movement skill Flash Step. This was one more trouble off my chest.

The current time was 7:32. You could say that the timing was perfect, but,

“U-Uuu, the sun is so yellow.”

even in a location where I couldn’t take damage, the pain from an all-nighter didn’t seem to have been reduced at all.

Ah, but maybe I can cure it by drinking a potion.

As I wobbled forward thinking such thoughts,

“Eh…? Why…”

A person that should not be here stood in front of me.

It was…

"…Souma."

clenching Master Torch and my letter so hard her hand was turning white, Train Girl.

Part 5.

After calling out to me, Train Girl fell silent.

I thought about moving somewhere more suitable, but even as I beckoned to Train Girl, she only shook her head and refused to move from that spot, so I gave up. In the end, the two of us sat down side by side with our backs against the walls of the church.

"…Did you read my letter?"

I inquired, and Train Girl nodded weakly. Hearing that, I felt slightly relieved.

But then, why did Train Girl come looking for me with such an expression?

"Then, why are you…"

I started to ask, and Train Girl slowly, haltingly, spoke.

"Souma, I just, couldn't stop worrying, about you… Even when I got into bed, I couldn't sleep at all. So, I went to the inn a bit earlier than you told me to. And then, I heard that you had already left, and they even gave me these things…"

Train Girl shook, gripping the letter and Master Torch tightly.

“Did that old man tell you something strange? That I was, like, at the end of my line, or something…”

“Even!! Even without anyone telling me, I can see that!”

Hearing my words, Train Girl erupted. With tears filling her eyes, she screamed.

“Isn’t this something very precious to you, Souma! To, to leave me this along with a letter, isn’t it, isn’t it like you’re heading off to die…!!”

She grabbed my arm tightly, almost painfully strongly,

“…If, it was going to be like this.”

but, her grip quickly loosened before letting go completely.

“If it was going to be like this, then, I would rather have been alone forever. If you’re going to die because of me, Souma, then…”

“–Don’t say that.”

Forcefully, I interrupted Train Girl.

“Sure I ended up having to duel Hisame, but I’m not regretting that at all.”

“Wh, at…?”

Train Girl looked up at me with her fatigued eyes, as I gently spoke to her.

“Seeing her, seeing Hisame fight, what did you think, Train Girl?”

“…I was scared. That person is not normal. I definitely would not be able to beat her. I thought that, there probably wasn’t anyone that could beat her.”

Hearing those words, I gave a big, big nod. That thing was nothing less than an absurdity walking around in clothes. Train Girl’s instinct was probably correct.

“I know right. That’s what I think too. That thing is completely unreasonable. She’s the definition of unfairness. And to have to face an opponent like that this early in the game, there’s gotta be limits to how shitty this game can get. I almost want to file a formal complaint, like are you even thinking about the game balance dear developers.”

“Souma…?”

I replied to Train Girl’s uneasy voice with a smile.

This situation was without a doubt completely unfair. But, so were all of the other experiences I’ve had in this game until now.

Closing my eyes, I could vividly recall everything as if it had happened just yesterday.

–The myriad of bugs. The nefarious chains of quests. The useless party members. The combat difficulty that ignores all sense of balance.

Until the moment I cleared the game, no, even after I had cleared the game, I had been thrown around by the unfairness of this game. But, because of this, I knew.

“But you know, Train Girl. The more unfair something is, the more fun it is when you flip it all on its head.”

“…Eh?”

She looked dumbfounded. Even I thought what I was saying was absurd.

But, there’s no helping it, because it’s the truth.

“I mean, try to imagine it. Imagine that I beat her, and her ears droop down… like, wouldn’t that be so amusing?”

“Souma. You really are kinda mean.”

Faintly, so very faintly, Train Girl smiled.

In the end, people don’t change easily. Even with my life on the line, even knowing that this was not a game anymore, what I’m doing and what I want to do remains the same.

What’s wrong with treating it like a game. There are just the tiny constraints of not being able to save, load, or logout. Bring it on.

After all, I’m a gamer through and through, a true Nekomimineko player.

No matter how real this world has become, I'll conquer it as a game!!

"Jeez, I can't believe you, Souma…"

Seeing me behave like that, for a moment Train Girl had returned to being the normal Train Girl, letting out an astonished sigh.
She then turned serious, and, looking straight at me, asked.

"Do you have a plan?"

"…Yes."

"Can you really win with it?"

"…I think so."

"Can I, believe you?"

"Yeah."

At last, as I answered without a moment's hesitation, Train Girl let out a deep breath.

Then,

"…I'll cheer you on, Souma."

she looked at me once more, eyes clear.

"I'll be cheering for you to win, cheering for you to stay alive. So, can you make me a promise?"

"A promise?"

Train Girl nodded "Yes", and held out her pinky towards me.

“Promise me that you won’t lose, Souma. Promise me that you definitely won’t die. Can you do that?”

I wrapped my own finger around her thin finger.

“I promise. I will definitely defeat Hisame.”

“…Then, I’ll trust in you, Souma.”

After our fingers parted, Train Girl stared at her pinky, and,

“Hafuu…”

letting out a strange sigh, her expression suddenly softened. But, she quickly covered her mouth, turning red.

“S-Sorry. That was, a yawn. Now that I’m relieved I suddenly felt sleepy…”

It would seem that that expression was what happens when a smile is mixed with a yawn.

“Then, how about sleeping for a bit?”

“Eh, but…”

“There’s still some time until the duel starts.”

I said, and, seeming to hesitate slightly,

“Th-Then, please wake me up when the time comes. I’ll, definitely, be there to cheer you…”

In the midst of saying something, her eyes closed, and quietly her head rested onto my shoulder.

I looked at her in surprise, but Train Girl was already deep asleep.

“…She’s like a child.”

But this goes to show just how much she had been worrying about me.

Looking at Train Girl, peacefully sleeping with her head on my shoulder,

“…Sorry.”

I said just that one word, and slowly stood up so as not to disturb her.

I knew that in reality, the future that Train Girl dreamed of will not come to pass. Most likely, I won’t be seeing Train Girl ever again.

Even then, I had to go.

I turned my head to the side, burning the sight of Train Girl blissfully sleeping against the wall into my eyes one last time, and walked away.

However, before I had walked even a few steps, I stopped. In the shadows of the wall surrounding the church, I noticed a pair of cat ears.

“…I’m surprised, to be getting so many visitors this early in the morning.”

I muttered, and from the shadows of the wall, Hisame showed herself.

“I am also quite surprised. You can act quite the ladies’ man. I honestly did not expect that.”

“Well, thank you.”

How did you know where I was? I didn’t ask anything stupid like that.

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“Yeah, it was quite the emotional story. But, I will not go easy on you.”

“Of course. …You heard it, didn’t you? There’s no point if I don’t beat you at your best.”

I couldn’t have her underestimating me now. Towards Hisame who was standing and looking at me about 5 meters away, I spat out words, provoking her.

“Are you sure you should be here? You sure are taking this easy, even though you would lose if I came close to you.”

“If I get caught like this, then that just means that’s all I’m worth.”

A prideful line as always. But, this was well within my expectations.

Well, it’s not that I expected her to show up here, but I had thought that there was a chance that I would see her one more time before the start of the duel.

“More importantly, have you completed your preparations for the duel? Our last fight gave me an excitement that I hadn’t felt for a while. I’m hoping that you will be able to show me strange skills and strange techniques even beyond the last time.”

On the surface, her voice was calm. However, I felt an underlying hint of the same sharp pressure from when she was pointing her sword at me.

Deliberately ignoring it, I shook my head.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ll be able to fulfill your expectations. I’m just gonna be teaching you something obvious.”

“Something obvious?”

Her cat ears tilted forward slightly as she asked, so I answered her.

“You are indeed fast. But, I’ll show you that in this town, you’re only the second fastest.”

When I declared this, slightly, just slightly, Hisame’s mouth twisted into a shape that was almost like a smile.

“Then, I don’t mind.”

Leaving behind those short words filled with strong feelings, she turned her back to me and walked away.

I yelled out towards her back.

“Hisame! Your speed is a talent that you should be proud of. You might even be the fastest of all of the humans (characters).”

Even with equipment that increased agility, with normal movement methods a player couldn’t even come close to breaching her domain. But, that did not mean that there was no way to win against her.

“But humans have always used knowledge and technology to fill the gap of talent. Today, I’ll make you thoroughly understand this.”

As if slamming all of my feelings into Hisame, still with her back facing me,

“–Today, with my full power, I will succeed in running away from you!”

After I had finished saying that, Hisame turned around for just a moment.

“Strange sword user, Souma. If you can, if you somehow, defeat me…”

She started to say something, but in the end, shook her head and cut herself off,

“I shall head to the inn first.”

and, ending the conversation, ran off at a speed that was hard for my eyes to follow.

"…Fuuu."

After the unexpected random encounter, I relaxed my tense body.

"It's about time."

It wouldn't be funny if I lazed around too much and ended up late.

At last, the critical moment has arrived. The next ten or so minutes will decide whether I live or die.

Feeling strangely high after having pulled an all-nighter, I started walking towards the place of my decisive battle.

As I neared my destination, the noise of the crowd increased.

Well, that was only to be expected.

The schedule had been determined already, so it wouldn't be strange for there to be onlookers or send-offs.

(H, uh? My legs…)

Finally, as the promised time drew closer, my legs froze.

–Am I going to be okay.

–Is this going to work out.

–Did I miss anything.

Insecurities welled up inside me, stopping me from moving forward.

And,

(Is this, really for the best.)

a worry that should've had been resolved long ago once again assaulted me.

But,

(I've, already made up my mind!)

I suppressed those thoughts with my willpower.

I've made all of the preparations for this moment. I can't turn back anymore.

I had declared to Hisame that I would run away with my full power, and what's more, I promised Train Girl that I will definitely win.

(Then, I have no choice but to go!!)

Gathering my determination, I took a step onto the ramp.

"Dear passengers! The Skyboat to Lichter is about to depart!"

"Ah, okay! Wait just a moment!"

Then, a few minutes later, the Skyboat that I boarded sailed off towards the only place safe against Hisame, *the sky*.

Looking out at the shrinking town of Ramlich, I shouted.

"I'm, I'm freeeeeeeeeee (alone again)———!!"

–As such, I won my duel against the strongest swordstress (Hisame) without crossing swords even once, and successfully escaped from what can't be escaped from (Train Girl).

Epilogue.

After countless close calls, the Skyboat somehow managed to safely reach the capital Lichter.

I did make sure to pick the safest route out of the departures in the near future, so even if we had crashed I probably would've been able to stay alive, but arriving without any problems was best.

Well, except for one.

There was just one thing that made me feel slightly regretful about arriving right on time.

That was,

"…You sure took your time. This must be the first time that I had to wait for the same person twice in the same day."

standing at Lichter's Skyboat terminal with a daunting pose, Hisame.

To be honest, I had expected her to be waiting here. I knew that by using a teleportation stone she would easily be able to beat the Skyboat to its destination.

But, that doesn't matter. All that matters is whether I can make it out of this situation alive. Standing in front of me, having disembarked from the Skyboat, she unhesitatingly drew her sword.

"Running from a duel… you're prepared for the consequences, right? Then, I shall have your death."

So proclaimed Hisame, but of course I wasn't alright with that.

"Wait! I never ran away from the duel!!"

"What are you saying at this point…"

Her cat ears twitched with displeasure, but I didn't stop speaking.

"Try to think back. Do you remember the conditions for the duel? I still remember them clearly. At that time, this is what I said. 'Tomorrow morning at 9, no, five minutes before that, come to the inn. The 30 minutes starting from 9'o clock sharp will be the duration of our duel. In those 30 minutes, you win if you touch me. Otherwise, I win.'"

I repeated the exact words that I said at the time and Hisame raised her voice in annoyance,

"And so, what about it? In the end, you weren't in front of the inn at 9… ah"

but halfway through she let out a surprised gasp, causing her cat ears to also jerk in surprise.

“It seems you’ve realized it too. See, I said ‘come to the inn five minutes before 9’, but I never said that ‘the duel will start at the inn’. I never specified where the duel would take place.”

“You don’t mean…”

“Yeah. Since a location was never set, that means that no matter where I was, the duel would start right on time. Then, during the 30 minutes of the duel, you were unable to catch me. That means…”

There, I took a big breath,

“–I win this duel!!”

and declared my victory over Hisame.

“With, such an, underhanded method…”

Her cat ears trembled, trying to bear the humiliation. But, the fact that she didn’t try to cut me down right here and now was proof that inside, she had already come to accept the truth. … That she, had lost.

“You know, I even checked with you multiple times to see if you were fine with these conditions.”

“Guh!”

For a moment, Hisame seemed at a loss for words, but she immediately opened her mouth again even more vigorously.

“I’ll admit my defeat in this duel. But, I just can’t accept this result. Let’s have another…”

“A win’s a win, so you will keep your promise right?”

Seeing the conversation turn in a bad direction, I hastily interrupted her by playing my own hand.

“Promise?”

“Did you forget that too? You promised that if I won, you wouldn’t participate in any more life-or-death duels, didn’t you?”

“Ye, ah…”

This was my final card.

My ultimate goal was to pretend to be indifferent about it and pluck out this promise from her. By making it so Hisame can’t challenge me anymore, I can ensure my own safety. That was the biggest requirement for victory for me.

“Mnnm…”

Her emotions were probably in turmoil right now.

Her head hung downwards so I couldn’t see her expression, but because of that her cat ears were in plain sight. They twisted and jerked here and there, flapping around wildly.

I’ve never seen cat ears moving around so wildly before.

(…Oh?)

However, after a while, they suddenly stood still.

She must have found some kind of answer, as her frantically moving cat ears came to a complete stop,

“…ka.”

and, still facing the ground, she muttered something.

But, her voice was so tiny that I couldn’t hear it well. Asking her what she said, I leaned my head closer, and,

“BAKAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA———!!”

Her voice was so loud that my ears started ringing.

While I was reeling from both the excessive volume as well as the extreme gap from her normal personality, she dashed off without glancing back even once, ears flat against her head, and quickly disappeared from sight.

Her speed was frightening. It might’ve been even faster than the Skyboat.

“Sigh. What is she, a kid…?”

Trying to ignore the sense of relief that swelled up inside me, I bad-mouthed her a bit.

Just like this, I had barely, but successfully, conquered Hisame’s duel event.

(I’m glad everything went smoothly.)

I knew that as I am right now, no matter what I did I would not be able to beat Hisame head on. At the same time, I also knew that I could not beat her head on.

The duel was the first in Hisame's event chain. If I clear that in a proper manner, or in other words beat Hisame in a fair and square duel, then a chain of forced events would start where I would be invited to Hisame's home and exposed to many vicious trials.

This meant that the only choice left for me was to win in a manner completely unrelated to fighting.

Normally, that would be quite an unreasonable condition. But, I knew Hisame well, and within that knowledge, there were three properties that I could exploit for my victory.

Those were Hisame's stubborn honesty in keeping promises, the fact that she had acrophobia, as well as her complete confidence in her own speed.

That's when I had come up with it, the idea of proposing a showdown based on speed like tag and running away on the Skyboat which Hisame with her fear of heights would never ride.

Even if Hisame was the fastest character, she would never be able to beat the apex of human knowledge and technology, the Skyboat. It was only obvious, but Hisame was not the fastest in the town of Ramlich; the Skyboat was.

It was a high speed transport that could travel from Ramlich to the capital, a distance that took me an entire two days to cover at

my prime, in just a matter of hours. Once I had set sail on that, no matter how hard Hisame tried, she would not be able to catch up, and, even if she was somehow able to keep up, it would've still been impossible for her and her fear of heights to catch me.

That's why I had believed in my victory, and used my last day to bid farewell to my acquaintances and do what could only be done in that town.

To be precise, I gave Master Torch to Train Girl and went to retrieve another Master Torch for my own use, bought a staff I hadn't bought and bringing it to meet an old friend, learned some skills that might be useful in the future at the Marimite Dojo, and overall did my best not to leave any regrets in this town.

Though, being found by Train Girl at the very end was the only unexpected event.

To be honest, I thought that this was a good chance to bid farewell to Train Girl. If I were to leave for the capital normally, Train Girl would probably follow me all the way there. But, if, due to a duel that was started because of Train Girl I had no choice but to go to the capital, and in addition left behind a letter that said not to follow me… I thought that Train Girl would likely stay in Ramlich.

That's why I was surprised when I ran into her in the morning, and seeing her cry shook my resolve slightly, and even in the end I wasn't able to be honest with her.

“This is for the best, right?”

Thinking that I would not be able to see Train Girl’s face ever again, I felt slightly, no, I felt quite lonely. But, I had already seen many times that bringing Train Girl along would only lead to misery. If I ever have the chance to return to Ramlich again, I should definitely go visit her.

Like this, I forcibly cut off my regrets.

Of course, I’m going to search for a way to return to the real world. That basic goal will not change. But, the feeling of wanting to try a bit harder in this world before then had started to take root within me.

Part of it was the spirit of a gamer wanting to conquer this unreasonable world. But, that was not all.

After all, the unreasonableness of Nekomimineko wasn’t targeted purely at players. When the player reaches a Game Over due to the world being destroyed, naturally all of the people who lived in that world would also die.

Having devoted my university life to Nekomimineko, I can assert with certainty that without the player, this world would be destroyed. But, right now, I wasn’t someone that could say I would save this insane world just because of that.

It’s just that, within the people that would die if this world was destroyed were people like Reinhart, Marielle, Tieru, and Train Girl.

That's why, just for a little while. Until this world stabilizes, or even just until I find a way to return to the real world. I had started to think that maybe I should try acting like the protagonist of this world for a bit.

…Of course, I was uneasy.

Nekomimineko was filled with troublesome and life-threatening events, and due to the game becoming reality, elements from outside the game have also been added to the mix. It was definitely not an easy road ahead.

However…

–I am the only one who knows this world is a game.

I have the knowledge and techniques acquired from the game, and more than anything I can exploit a diverse variety of bugs. At the very least, I will not lose to anyone in terms of my passion towards Nekomimineko.

No matter what happens to this world from now on, what I have to do remains the same. Turn the bugs on their heads, crush every unreasonable obstacle, and take the best results by force.

If it's me, I can do it. I mean, I beat the strongest character in Nekomimineko, Mitsuki Hisame. No matter what trials await me, they can't…

“Hey, hey, mister.”

But, at that time, a childish voice flew into my ear.

(It, can’t be…)

I felt cold sweat starting to form.

The confidence that I had mere seconds ago started to crumble with an audible noise.

It can’t be. Could this voice belong to one of the top three most dangerous NPCs in the capital, to that Poison-tan…

“–Mister, are you a hero?”

And so, my adventure has only just begun!

I am the only one who knows this world is a game 1 (End)

Afterword.

To those of you who are reading the series for the first time, nice to meet you. To those coming from the web novel, hello again.

This is the author, Usubaa.

Some of you readers may have realized it already, but I am actually quite a serious gamer. Though it doesn't quite match Souma's level, I feel like nearly a third of my life has been devoted to games. Games have really become a big part of my life.

It was the summer of my senior year in high school. One of my fond memories was when my classmates would brag about stuff like finishing their English worksheets, I was bragging just as proudly about finishing the newest game in a popular RPG series. There was also how, when the exams came, I had cleared more games than reference books, or how, because I got super addicted to a certain famous novel game that I bought after the general entrance exams, I completely slacked off on preparing for private university exams and ended up finishing the game in a week, or how on the day of an exam I stayed up until 5am writing a fanfiction for that novel game; there was no shortage of accounts of my irresponsibility during exam periods. Ah, speaking of that exam on the day I had stayed up until 5am—in the end, I was accepted to that university, so please don't worry.

Talking about my experiences like this, you might be getting the impression that games had been ruining my life. That would be a huge misunderstanding; they're actually actively ruining my life. Especially MMOs. They're like demons sucking away all of my time.

But, at the same time, games have also helped me a lot. People have always called games the epitome of pointlessness, but if

you immerse so much of your life into them, you'd start to find a little bit of meaning in anything. In fact, I learned kanji from the dialogue in DQ, English from the magic in FF, the joy of making things from RPG Maker, and finally was able to publish my very own book, all through the help of games. Because of all this, hooray for games, seriously.

Especially my third point, the RPG Maker series. They're really unique and interesting, and I highly recommend them. I'm by no means saying this just because of their developer.

Anyways. Since this book was about a game, you'd think it'd be similar to a few of those famous works, but this wasn't the case. To begin with, when I think back on my experience, the most vivid memories I had of games was this one that I couldn't clear because it kept crashing just before the last event as if the disk were damaged, or of another game where the ultimate move was such an ultimate move that you would be invincible through the entire skill but instantly die the moment it ended, or this other game where, due to incompatibilities with the hardware, the game would freeze about once every hour, so every time you switched into the battle screen, your heart would start racing, but for a different reason… I realized that it was the buggy games that I remembered the most.

I also remembered strangely enjoying the playstyles resulting from the creative efforts due to players' greediness, like leveling

up sword skills by whacking away on your horse, shoplifting by teleporting out of stores, leaving a thief alone only to climb onto the roof every night to steal their money, moving at crazy speeds through skill cancelling, repeatedly making a new character just to take all of their starting items and then deleting it, basically things that you'd think were definitely not the way the producers of the game intended you to play.

And so, after thinking back on all of the games that I've played and collecting all of these fun but unintended moments, this work was born.

Of course, since this work referenced many actual bugs, and I tried to write it so that people who know them should be able to tell, I think there will definitely be people who will be able to identify the games that these bugs came from. It would make me happy if those that get the references end up grinning nostalgically, and those that don't end up imagining what such a game would've been like.

I feel like I've been talking about nothing but games again, and since the page limit is getting close, let's start with the acknowledgements.

To begin with, I want to thank my family who supported my decision to become a writer, and my friends who had given me all kinds of advice. I have a hard time saying this face-to-face, but I'm really thankful from the bottom of my heart.

To my editor, F □-san, I'm sorry for all of the trouble I've caused you. I feel like I've been apologizing to you in every email, but I promise I'll pick up the slack from the second volume onwards. …Probably.

To the illustrator, Ichizen-san, thank you for patiently listening to all of my selfish requests. Every time I let my guard down you surprise me with amazing illustrations that far exceed my expectations. I look forward to continue working with you in the future.

In addition, to the proofreader, designer, the various voice actors and staff that participated in the audio drama, and to everyone whose help made this book possible, thank you very much.

Also, to everyone who had posted their thoughts and feedback on the web novel, your feelings are what's driving this series. I don't think this book would be here now if not for everyone's support. Really, thank you very much! Yoroshiku onegaishimasu!

Finally, a big thank you to all of you readers who decided to pick up such a big and bulky book!!

I hope we'll meet again in the second volume.